The following interview with three former Levi Workers, Joe Nichols, Irene Whittemberger, and Beulah Mull discusses the struggles that these three and their fellow workers had in Blue Ridge, Ga., over the last two years.

In August 1966 the Levi Strauss Blue Ridge plant was struck for better wages and working conditions. The strike lasted for about seven weeks later. Rather than giving up the workers now have formed a co-op corporation called Appalachian Enterprises, which has contracted with a dress manufacturing company. A plant has been established in Mineral Bluff, Ga. The people associated with the co-op have also planned a cooperative grocery store, gas station, and housing project as well as a day care center for worker's children and a health clinic for the county, which at present has no hospital. (See the MOVEMENT, January, 1968).

The interview was conducted by Brian Heggen, and sent to the MOVEMENT for publication. A slightly different version of the same interview has been distributed by Liberation News Service.

Brian: Why did Levi come into this area?
Irene: Well, they'd find some cheap labor. There's plenty of labor. They made a labor survey before they came.
Brian: Who invited them here?
Beulah: The businessmen, the lawyers and manufacturers.
Brian: What type of conditions did Levi set up? Of conditions did you have to work under?
Beulah: They were just terrible.
Brian: What was it like?
Irene: It was a nightmare. In the beginning, they were very nice to us. As time went on, the pay was lower and the conditions were terrible. We used to have to work very long hours. The work was very hard.
Brian: Did you try to organize?
Irene: Yes, many times. We held a meeting in the schoolhouse in Blue Ridge and got up and read the contract over very fast. It was hard to understand. We were not informed of the terms of the contract and we were not paid for our work. We were not treated with respect.
Brian: And the contract was not explained to us in any way, it was just read over very fast. It was a matter of a few hours, the contract was there, and we were not allowed to read it. We were not told about the conditions of the work.

Community Feeling
Brian: Did people in this area have a feeling of togetherness, a feeling of community?
Irene: Yes, I think they did.
Brian: Did Levi try to break this? Irene: Oh, they broke it.
Brian: How?
Beulah: They were using the local people to do the work for them.
Irene: Well, the whole system in Levi was set up to get what they had to get cheaply. I think it cost them money. It made money for Levi, but it cost us money.
Brian: And the schedule was so tight that you didn't have a minute to lose.
Irene: You couldn't talk. And they meant for it to be that way, they didn't want you to be together or have time to talk to each other.

Support the Blue Ridge Strikers Don't Buy Levi's

Irene: We were advised to stay in the schoolhouse in Blue Ridge and get the contract and read the contract over very fast. It was hard to understand. We were not informed of the terms of the contract and we were not paid for our work. We were not treated with respect.

Brian: And the contract was not explained to us in any way, it was just read over very fast. It was a matter of a few hours, the contract was there, and we were not allowed to read it. We were not told about the conditions of the work.

Company Violations
Brian: Did the company violate the contract?
Irene: Yes, every day. No sooner did they sign the contract, you could just bet on that every morning.
Irene: They paid no attention to all the seniority because in our contract every time you had a clause that it said seniority it would say at the bottom, "if, in the opinion of management..." So this is the thing that they insisted on. And no, we had no rights, we could not fight that, they'd say, although we'd advised them to do it.

Brian: So when you went on your "wildcat" strike, the contract had already been broken?
Irene: Over and over.
Beulah: It is an international support you when you went out on strike?
Brian: Yes. No one else supported us at all. We had no support from anyone else.
Irene: No support.
Brian: Did you not go to support them?
Irene: That was something they'd say. "Well, who does it matter? It's all illegal anyway."

SCABS
Brian: What did the locals come from, while you were out on the picket line?
Irene: Well, they were local people that had never worked at Levi. Well, not everyone. Some of the locals that seemed to have been hired at Levi before had helped, and then we found out that they were also working at Levi and we found out that they were working there.
Beulah: It was a very bad thing, because it was a very bad thing for us.
Irene: And then we had to go out and start all over again.

Brian: What did they do?
Irene: They didn't do anything.

Strikebreaking Violence
Brian: What sort of action was taken against you during the strike, with you being out there on the picket line? Did you get attacked, were there repressions?
Beulah: That woman was sent to jail, she was the head of the picket line and hospital and the great thing was that they were sent to jail and they couldn't be sent to jail. They were sent to jail, and they had a little mistreatment of us. That was very bad, but there weren't anybody there, even there to do things, you know.

Irene: And state patrol all over the place. The whole town right after we struck the weekend that he had about 30 parolments up here, there was three-four destinations were killed on the highways that weekend. The whole town, the strike, and it's been going on for years and a half, right? Irene: Yes, it's been going on for years and a half, right?
Irene: How long did that strike last?
Beside: Let's see, we struck August, day 30, 1965 and let's see.

Ireren September the 13th, 1967, was the election and then we dropped the picket line. We believe we held it 50 weeks and one day, thinking the union would do something. Beside we wanted to hold the union in New York and other states, not only in California, and we lost in Yuma County it would have ended. So we started it and started talking to some of the people that were working in Levi. So we can't say it's the first time it's been good, that's not the idea. There were a lot of people that were in the office and it's not because they needed a union. It was a matter that the manager made them think that it was a better way, and that's why they didn't vote for the union.

The Co-op

Irene: How are decisions made in the co-op? What type of structure do you have?

Irene: We made up an open bylaws and we have a board and the board can make decisions, but the membership can reverse those decisions if it doesn't suit them. You know, a majority, its a membership, individual thing. Everybody has their rights. Beside: It is jointly owned by everybody within it.

Irene: Yes, Irene: What type of trouble have you had since you formed the co-op? Have you given people fair contracts? Have you given people trouble contracts with the machinery?

Beside: Well the first contract we was there. It was a bit of a business, they were too low. They were too low last year, we couldn't even meet the payroll on it.

Beside: We didn't know anything to do, but now, we were. We found out that we were at least 52 dollars underpaid — from 2 to 4 dollars underpaid — on the down. So we couldn't make the machine, we turned we couldn't make any money, and now we're getting to have some money because we can't even fixing, they're not even the man's that sold them on.

Irene: If you worked for those machines it'd be just like being stolen goods. We'd be out of business. But people know what they're doing have consistently been taken advantage of, and they come through, have they helped you?

Beside: Well no, 4,500 dollars we started this thing on, and we just paid what bills we had to pay and got it squared and been on sick, we're behind on payroll. We could have made it probably the 4,000 if we hadn't got messed up about our machine contract and our sewing contract too. We could have took the 4,000 and swung it, it would have been hard but we could have, but you see now we're messed up and having to shut the doors and get a new contract and new machines.

Beside: In Levi there did you get the 4,000 from?

Irene: It was the Southern Christian Leadership Fund.

ILGWU

Beside: Did you ever get together and take your case direct to the union people from the ILGWU?

Irene: Yes, well, the thing we walked out on we had the business agent up there and the area manager, the plant manager, we said we had the office over four hours about two months before we struck trying to get the compromise, you see, the business agent would not open his mouth, he would not defend us in any way. And we have tried in show him where it's completely, absolutely not fair, right. They were going push girls out the door, not only back, but they are, and that's what this is in so many words, and he said, "Well girls you can learn a new dirt and go to a place where you can't make a living, it's just an old dog now tricks." That was his comment as business agent there. He heard all this.

Beside: You've been through this, through this strike and setting up the co-op for ever a year and a half. There must have been a lot times when people were asking you to make compromise, when people say, "Well why don't you deal with us and you'll give you a bit and you'll give in on this.

Irene: Satisfied.

Levi "Compromise"

Beside: Have they ever offered you a compromise that was like making a sale? Beside: No, so far we haven't compromised. Levi never did offer us anything except come back to work and then when we come back to work we'll settle all this, but we see we know they wouldn't and the union just didn't help it, the way we walked back, we're all in the Levi plant because they know they didn't intend to settle anything. We're not going to settle what made you decide to form the co-op? That's a pretty unique thing.

Beside: People if you ever had anything just dissolve, but you went on and did something else, why? What do you think the picketers were at least 50 and 60 miles one way in order to find work. When we struck they had to work. Well, no matter where we are in our area we find the same thing sweatshop conditions. When the wages rose little, the picket line rose up. When the production is so high you already can't control and still raise production every time there is a wage Low, the wage law don't help people like us at all. We have to have something to try to get production, who, we're never on the bus.

Irene: Beside Beside, that Levi I mean it just it would call all these places around in a hundred mile radius and tell them not to come in — that we were agitators and troublemakers. And we had to gone somewhere. Beside there's of course you can't even get into other sweat-shops, because they had been called beforehand.

They've got to pay you what they think you're worth, why we think we can make it on our own equals, Beside You've got the story about your struggle around here to a lot of Liberals, liberal organizations. Have they responded, have they come through, have they helped you?

Beside: Well no, I don't think they would. Because we're not going to win, we're not going to win with the strike. We've got to work and keep on working. We can start this thing up, and we've got to make money, and we can't do that with the strike. We've got to do something else. We're too new to know what will come out of it. We know it's the only thing, we've got to try. Beside: Then the only solution you see is to build something to control.

Mike Lowde: The president says his compromise, including men like Mr. Hass, the guy who owns Levi's-Loom, is in order to probe deep into the camps and to reach the people at the bottom who are really unemployed and have skills and abilities. What would you tell these people?

Beside: When you can work 6 days a week for Levi-Stauss and you live poverty — and we can prove this — it's no day you can't make a living at Levi-Stauss...

Irene: Then how are poor people gonna solve the problem of their being poor? Beside: Well, you know we're trying to solve our problem — through building a factory of our own... We're too new to know what will come of it. We know it's the only thing, we've got to try. Beside: Then the only solution you see is to build something to control.

Unions in the South

Irene: During this obviously the unions set you down a bit. What do you think about unions in America now?

Irene: We're 'in union, but we sure don't approve of the way ILGWU does in the South because they don't fight for their people, they don't get good contracts for their people, they don't seem to be there when they're needed. They come in and they organize — we on the South organizing ourselves — then they come in and get union. And they don't help us. They don't help us while we were in the plant. They didn't help us when we 'were' still. We wouldn't of widespread if we'd had good support from the union. Miler Why would a union do things like that?

Irene: Well, they'd tell it you that it's not for the door, but that's the only thing I see they get from it.

Beside: They're losing out in the South because people are becoming very distrustful of the unions because they don't fight hard enough, they don't do in and do what they say they'll do in the end you're always worse off than you were before you funded with the union.

Irene: I don't think unions ought to go in a place until they're ready to support and back up the people they do more harm than good.

Beside: And the South really needs unions.

The movement needs unions, but it needs them under worse than anybody because we really need any organization. We need unions that will fight for us.

A Little Background on Levi-Stauss

Levi-Stauss is the world's largest producer of jeans and casual shoes in its price range. While this corporation consistently withheld information regarding its operations, profits have been obviously good since both its net worth and current assets continue to grow each year. Net worth has grown from almost $32 million at the end of 1964 to over $40 million at the end of 1966. During the same period current assets grew from over $53 million to $100 million.

The management of the corporation includes Walter A. Hass, who is also President of the Levi-Stauss Realty Co. and Levi Security Co., both real estate holding companies. Mr. Hass, who is worth an estimated $10 million, is also a director of the Crocker-Citizens National Bank, Pacific Gas and Electric Co., Pacific Intermountain Express Co., Col Tile Insurance Co., and National Ice and Cold Storage Co.

Another Director is J. Earl Anderson, is a director of the Wells Fargo Bank, and is an officer in both company.

A third director, Walter Hass Jr., son of the Chairman of the Board, is a director of the Pacific Trust and Savings Bank and the bank of America the largest bank in the world, as well as being an officer in the two realty companies.

The corporation employs about 15,500 persons in the U.S., mainly in branch offices in the South.

International operations include Levi Strauss International Inc., a wholly owned holding company, British Company, and the Fungus and the Bank of America the largest bank in the world, as well as being an officer in the two realty companies.