SHARECROPPERS UNION: ALABAMA 1931-1935

Focus/Summary
The purpose of this lesson is to discuss with students the creation of the Share Croppers Union (SCU) in rural Alabama during the Great Depression. Members of the SCU organized sharecroppers and became the largest Communist led mass organization in the Deep South. The SCU organized strikes in response to the New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). This New Deal legislation which called for acreage reduction policies displaced many sharecroppers.

Vital Theme and Narrative
Patterns of Social and Political Interaction

Objective
Students will explore the motivations, strategies, successes, and struggles of the Communist led Sharecroppers Union in Alabama during the Great Depression.

Procedures
A) Opening the Lesson
1. Review the system of sharecropping that developed after the Civil War to understand the economic plight of sharecroppers in the South during the Great Depression by using strategy of “THINK, PAIR, and SHARE”
   - How did the plantation economy keep African Americans "trapped in a culture of poverty"?
   - How did the sharecropping system work? How did shared economic conditions challenge Jim Crow?
   - Why were labor organizations like the Sharecroppers Union considered a threat to the Jim Crow system?

2. Students will view pictures of sharecroppers in the South taken during the 1930s using photograph analysis organizer to guide discussions. Photos of sharecropping located at the following website: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/brown/photos.htm
**Photograph Analysis Guide**

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<td>Describe what you see in the photograph, e.g.; the forms and structures, the arrangement of the various elements. Avoid personal feelings or interpretations. Your description should help someone who has not seen the image to visualize it.</td>
<td>Describe your personal feelings, associations, and judgments about the image. Always anchor your subjective response in something that is seen. For example, &quot;I see…, and it makes me think of…&quot;</td>
<td>Prior knowledge based on experience, study, assumptions, and intuitions.</td>
<td>What you conclude.</td>
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What questions does this photograph raise? What else do you need to know?
B) Developing the Lesson-“The Reality of the AAA” and “The Response of Alabama Sharecroppers”

1. Students will read excerpt from historian Robin D.G. Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (see attached Document A)

2. Students will analyze political cartoon. Cartoon (see attached Document B) **use website below as a guide to analyze cartoon with students**
   

3. Students will examine and analyze primary source documents (Documents A-G) in small groups in order to outline goals, strategies, challenges, and grievances of the Sharecroppers Union (SCU) in the 1930s. Students can create graphic organizers on butcher paper to illustrate and outline this information.

Concluding Assessment: Written Response

Using the documents provided and background knowledge, to what extent were labor organizations like the Sharecroppers Union considered a threat to the Jim Crow system and how might their campaigns have influenced later generations of activists?
A predominantly black underground organization of sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and agricultural laborers, the Share Croppers Union (SCU) was the largest Communist-led mass organization in the Deep South. Founded in Alabama in the spring of 1931, the organization was first initiated by black tenant farmers in Tallapoosa County. Ralph and Tommy Gray gathered together a small group of black tenant farmers and sharecroppers and requested assistance from the Communist Party in Birmingham. Mack Coad, an illiterate black steelworker originally from Charleston, South Carolina, was dispatched from Birmingham on behalf of the Communist Party and became the first secretary of the Croppers and Farm Workers Union. Based mainly in Tallapoosa and Lee counties, Alabama, under Coad's leadership the union built up an estimated membership of eight hundred within a two-month period.

In July 1931, the union faced its first in a series of violent confrontations with local authorities. A shootout between union members and the local sheriff at Camp Hill, Alabama, left Ralph Gray dead and forced many union and non-union tenant farmers into hiding. Mack Coad was forced to flee Alabama for the time being, but the union regrouped under the leadership of Young Communist League activist Eula Gray, Tommy Gray's teenage daughter. Once the union was reconstructed, it adopted the name SCU.

By the summer of 1932, the reconstituted SCU claimed six hundred members and a new secretary was appointed. Al Murphy, a black Birmingham Communist originally from McRae, Georgia, transformed the SCU into a secret, underground organization. SCU militants were armed for self-defense and met under the auspices of "Bible meetings" and "sewing clubs." Under Murphy's leadership, the union spread into the "black belt" counties of Alabama and into a few areas on the Georgia-Alabama border.

In December 1932, another shootout occurred near Reeltown, Alabama (not far from Camp Hill), which resulted in the deaths of SCU members Clifford James, John McMullen, and Milo Bentley, and the wounding of several others. The confrontation erupted when SCU members tried to resist the seizure of James's livestock by local authorities who were acting on behalf of James's creditors. Following a wave of arrests and beatings, five SCU members were convicted and jailed for assault with a deadly weapon.

Faced with large-scale evictions resulting from New Deal acreage reduction policies, sharecroppers flocked to the union. Its growth was by no means hindered by the gun battle. By June 1933, Murphy claimed nearly two thousand members, and by the fall of 1934 the official figures skyrocketed to eight thousand. Although most of those who joined the union were victims of mass evictions, the SCU led a series of strikes by cotton pickers in Tallapoosa, Montgomery, and Lee counties. Nevertheless by 1934 the SCU had failed to recruit a single white member. The Party attempted to form an all-white Tenants League, but the effort proved to be a dismal failure.

Murphy, who left Alabama in the winter of 1934, was replaced by Clyde Johnson (alias Thomas Burke and Al Jackson), a white Communist originally from Minnesota who had had considerable experience as an organizer in Birmingham, Atlanta, and Rome, Georgia. Partially reflecting the new outlook of the Popular Front, Johnson made an effort to bring the SCU out of its underground existence and transform it into a legitimate agricultural labor union. He founded and edited the SCU's first newspaper, the Union Leader, and created an executive committee that elected Hosie Hart, a black Communist from Tallapoosa County, as president. Johnson attempted to establish a merger with the newly formed, Socialist-led Southern Tenant Farmers Union, but the leadership of the latter, particularly H. L. Mitchell and J. R. Butler, rejected the idea, claiming that the SCU was merely a Communist front.

Throughout 1935, despite the union's push for legal status in the black belt, SCU activists faced severe repression during a cotton choppers' strike in the spring and a cotton pickers' strike between August and September. In Lowndes and Dallas counties, in particular, dozens of strikers were jailed and beaten, and at least six people were killed.
In 1936 the SCU, claiming between ten thousand and twelve thousand members, spread into Louisiana and Mississippi. It opened its first public headquarters in New Orleans and, in an attempt to transform the SCU into a trade union, officially abandoned its underground structure. However, the SCU failed to deter the rapid process of proletarianization occurring in the cotton South—a manifestation of mass evictions and the mechanization of agriculture. Johnson continued to make overtures toward the Southern Tenant Farmers Union throughout 1936, but all efforts to combine the two unions failed. Thus, with support from Communist rural experts, particularly Donald Henderson, Johnson chose to liquidate the SCU as an autonomous body. All sharecroppers and tenant farmers were transferred into the ranks of the National Farmers Union, and the SCU’s agricultural wage laborers were told to join the Agricultural Worker’s Union, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor. The latter soon transferred into the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of American in 1937.

Failing to solve the problems created by the New Deal and the mechanization of agriculture in the cotton South, the Party's decision to divide the organization "by tenure" in 1937 marked the end of the SCU. Nevertheless, a few SCU locals in Alabama and Louisiana chose not to affiliate with any other organization and maintained an autonomous existence well into World War II.

FURTHER READING

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A Modern Simon Legree

Under the AAA, thousands must leave their land.

The South's Cotton Belt
**The following documents should be downloaded/formatted to fit your individual classroom needs**

**Document C:** Students will read article “The Epic of the Black Belt” by Harold Preece from March 1936 The Crisis

http://books.google.com/books?id=y1cEAAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA92&ots=JOIkYrYG7M3&dq=lowndes%20county%20alabama%20sharecroppers%20union&pg=PA92#v=onepage&q&f=false

**Document D:** Correspondence to Governor Benjamin Miller, discussing violence in Camp Hill, Alabama, between members of the Alabama Sharecroppers Union and county officials. Documents can be downloaded as PDF file at link below.


**Document E:** Transcript/video discussing SCU organizer Ned Cobb

http://www.teachersdomain.org/resource/bf09.socst.us.prosp.nedcobb/

**Document F:** Transcript/recording interview with historian Robin D.G. Kelley discussing the Sharecroppers Union (SCU) in Alabama

Document G: a poem written by Alabama poet John Beecher in the 1930s

“In Egypt Land”

I.

It was Alabama, 1932
but the spring came
same as it always had.
A man just couldn't help believing
This would be a good year for him
When he saw redbud and dogwood everywhere in bloom
And the peach tree blossoming
All by itself
Up against the gray boards of the cabin.
A man had to believe
So Cliff James hitched up his pair of old mules
And went out and plowed up the old land
The other man's land but he plowed it
And when it was plowed it looked new again
The cotton and corn stalks turned under
The red clay shining with wet
Under the sun.

Years ago
He thought he bought this land
Borrowed the money to pay for it
From the furnish merchant in Nostasulga
Big white man named Mr. Parker
But betwixt the interest and the bad times coming
Mr. Parker had got the land back
And nigh on to $500 more owing to him
For interest seed fertilizer and rations
With a mortgage on all the stock—
The two cows and their calves
The heifer and the pair of old mules—
Mr. Parker could come drive them off the place any day
If he took a notion
And the law would back him.

Mighty few sharecroppers
Black folks or white
Ever got themselves stock like Cliff had
They didn't have any cows
They plowed with the landlord's mule and tools
They didn't have a thing.
Took a heap of doing without
To get your own stock and your own tools
But he'd done it
And still that hadn't made him satisfied.
The land he plowed
He wanted to be his.
Now all come of wanting his own land
He was back to where he started.
Any day
Mr Parker could run him off
Drive away the mules the cows the heifer and the calves
To sell in town
Take the wagon the plow tools the store-bought furniture and the shotgun on the debt.
No
That was one thing Mr Parker never would get a hold of
Not that shotgun....

Remembering that night last year
Remembering the meeting
In the church he and his neighbors always went to
Deep in the woods
And when the folks weren't singing or praying or
Clapping and stomping
You could hear the branch splashing over rocks
Right out behind.
That meeting night
The preacher prayed a prayer
For all the sharecroppers
White and black
Asking the good Lord Jesus
To look down
And see how they were suffering.
"Five cent cotton Lord
and no way Lord for a man to come out.
Fifty cents a day Lord for working in the field
Just four bits Lord for a good strong hand
From dawn to dark Lord from can till can't
Ain't no way Lord a man can come out.
They's got to be a way Lord show us the way..."
And then they sang.
"Go down Moses" was the song they sang
"Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh to let me people go"
And when they had sung the song
The preacher go up and he said
"Brothers and sisters
we got with us tonight
a colored lady teaches school in Birmingham
going to tell us about the Union
what's got room for colored folks and white
what's got room for all the folks
that ain't got no land
that ain't got no stock
that ain't got something to eat half the year
that ain't got no shoes
that raises all the cotton
but can't get none to wear
'cept old patchedy overhauls and floursack dresses.
Brothers and sisters
Listen to this colored lady from Birmingham
Who the Lord done sent I do believe
To show us the way..."

Then the colored lady from Birmingham
Got up and told them.
She told them how she was raised on a farm herself
A sharecrop farm near Demopolis
And walked six miles to a one-room school
And six miles back every day
Till her people moved to Birmingham
Where there was a high school for the colored
And she went to it.
Then she worked in white folks’ houses
And saved what she made
To go to college.
She went to Tuskegee
And when she finished
Got a job teaching school in Birmingham
But she could never forget
The people she was raised with
The sharecrop farmers
And how they had to live.
No
All the time she was teaching school
She thought about them
And what she could do for them
And what they could do for themselves.
Then one day
Somebody told her about the Union...
If everybody joined the Union she said
A good strong hand would get what he was worth
A dollar (Amen sister)
Instead of fifty cents a day.
At settling time the cropper could take his cotton to the gin
And get his own fair half and the cotton seed
Instead of the landlord hauling it off and cheating on the weight.
“All you made was four bales Jim” when it was really six
(Ain’t it God’s truth?)
and the Union would get everybody the right to have a garden spot
not just cotton crowded up to the house
and the Union would see the children got a schoolbus
like the white children rode in every day
and didn’t have to walk twelve miles.
That was the thing
The children getting to school
(Amen)
the children learning something besides chop cotton and pick it
(Yes)
the children learning how to read and write
(Amen)
the children knowing how to figure
so the landlord wouldn’t be the only one
could keep accounts
(Preach the Word sister).

Then the door banging open against the wall
And the Laws in their lace boots
The High Sheriff himself
With his deputies behind him.
Folks scrambling to get away
Out the windows and door
And the Laws’ fists going clunk clunk clunk
On all the men’s and women’s faces they could reach
And when everybody was out and running
The pistols going off behind them.
Next meeting night
The men that had them brought shotguns to church
And the High Sherriff got a charge of birdshot in his body
When Ralph Gray with just his single barrel
Stopped a car full of Laws
On the road to the church
And shot it out with 44’s.
Ralph Gray died
But the people in the church
All got away alive.

II.

The crop was laid by.
From now till picking time
Only the hot sun worked
Ripening the bolls
And men rested after the plowing and plowing
Women rested
Little boys rested
And little girls rested
After the chopping and chopping with their hoes.
Now the cotton was big.
Now the cotton could take care of itself from the weds
While the August sun worked
Ripening the bolls.

Cliff James couldn’t remember ever making a better crop
On that old red land
He’d seen so much of
Wash down the gullies toward the Tallapoosa
Since he’d first put a plow to it.
Never a better crop
But it had taken the fertilize
And it had taken work
Fighting the weeds
Fighting the weevils…
Ten bales it looked like it would make
Ten good bales when it was picked
A thousand dollars worth of cotton once
Enough to pay out on seed and fertilize and furnish for the season
And the interest and something down
On the land
New shoes
For the family to go to church in
Work shirts and overalls for the man and boys
A bolt of calico for the woman and girls
And a little cash money for Christmas.

Now though
Ten bales of cotton
Didn’t bring what three used to.
Two hundred and fifty dollars was about what his share of this year’s crop would bring
At five cents a pound
Not even enough to pay out on seed and fertilize and furnish for the season
Let alone interest on the land Mr Parker was asking for
And $80 more on the back debt owing to him.
Mr Parker had cut his groceries off at the commissary last month
And there had been empty bellies in Cliff James’ house
With just cornbread buttermilk and greens to eat.
If he killed a calf to feed his family
Mr Parker could send him to the chain-gang
For slaughtering mortgaged stock.
Come settling time this fall
Mr Parker was going to get every last thing
Every dime of the cotton money
The corn
The mules
The cattle
And the law would back him.
Cliff James wondered
Why he had plowed the land in the spring
Why he had worked and worked his crop
His wife and children alongside him in the field
And now pretty soon
They would all be going out again
Dragging their long sacks
Bending double in the hot sun
Picking Mr Parker's cotton for him.

Sitting on the stoop of his cabin
With his legs hanging over the rotten board edges
Cliff James looked across his fields of thick green cotton
To the woods beyond
And a thunderhead piled high in the south
Piled soft and white like cotton on the stoop
Like a big day's pick
Waiting for the wagon
To come haul it to the gin.

On the other side of those woods
Was John McMullen's place
And over yonder just east of the woods
Ned Cobb's and beyond the rise of ground
Milo Bentley lived that was the only new man
To mover into the Reeltown section that season.
Milo just drifted in from Detroit
Because his work gave out up there
And a man had to feed his family
So he came back to the farm
Thinking things were like they used to be
But he was finding out different.
Yes
Everybody was finding out different
Cliff and John and Ned and Milo and Judson Simpson across the Creek
Even white croppers like Mr. Sam and his brother Mr Bill
They were finding out.
It wasn't many years ago that Mr Sam's children
Would chunk at Cliff James' children
On their way home from school
And split little Cliff's head open with a rock once
Because his daddy was getting too uppity
Buying himself a farm.
Last time they had a Union meeting though at Milo Bentley’s place
Who should show up but Mr Sam and Mr Bill
And asked was it only for colored
Or could white folks join
Because something just had to be done.
When Cliff told them
It was for all the poor farmers
That wanted to stick together
They paid their nickel to sign up
And their two cents each for the first month’s dues
And they said they would try to get
More white folks in
Because white men and black
Were getting beat with the same stick these days.

Things looked worse than they ever had in all his time of life
Cliff James thought
But they looked better too
They looked better than they ever had in all his time of life
When a sharecropper like Ralph Gray
Not drunk but cold sober
Would stand off the High Sheriff with birdshot
And get himself plugged with 44’s
Just so the others at the meeting could get away
And after that the mod hunting for who started the Union
Beating men and women up with pistol butts and bull whips
Throwing them in jail and beating them up more
But not stopping it
The Union going on
More people signing up
More and more every week
Meeting in houses on the quiet
Nobody giving it away
And now white folks coming in too.

III.

“You”
Cliff James said
“nor the High Sheriff
nor all his deputies
is gonna git them mules.”
The head deputy put the writ of attachment back in his inside pocket
Then his hand went to the butt of his pistol
But he didn’t pull it.
“I’m going to get the High Sheriff and help”
he said
“and come back and kill you all in a pile.”

Cliff James and Ned Cobb watched the deputy whirl the car around
And speed down the rough mud road.
He took the turn skidding
And was gone.
“He’ll be back in an hour” cliff James said
“if’n he don’t wreck hisseff.”
“Where you fixin’ to go?” Ned Cobb asked him.
“I’s fixin’ to stay right where I is.”
“I’ll go git the others then.”
“No need of eve’ybody gittin’ kilt” Clif James said.
“Better gittin’ kilt quick
than perishin’ slow like we been a’doin’” and Ned Cobb was gone
cutting across the wet red field full of dead cotton plants
and then he was in the woods
bare now except for the few green pines
and though Cliff couldn’t see him
he could see him in his mind
calling out John McMullen and telling him about it
then cutting off east to Milo Bentley’s
crossing the creek on the foot-log to Judson Simpson’s…
Cliff couldn’t see him
Going to Mr Sam or Mr Bill about it
No
This was something you couldn’t expect white folks to get in on
Even white folks in your Union.

There came John McMullen out of the woods
Toting that old musket of his.
He said it went back to Civil War days
And it looked it
But John could really knock a squirrel off a limb
Or get a running rabbit with it.
“Here I is” John said
and “what you doin’ ‘bout you folks?”
“What folks?”
“The ones belon’ to you.
You childrens and wife.”
“I disremembered ‘em” Cliff James said.
“I done disremembered all about my children and my wife.”
“They can’t stay with mine” John said.
“we ain’t gonna want no womenfolks nor childrens
not here we ain’t.”
Cliff James watched his family going across the field
The five backs going away from him
In the wet red clay among the dead cotton plants
And soon they would be in the woods
His wife
Young Cliff
The two girls
And the small boy…
They would just have to get along
Best way they could
Because a man had to do
What he had to do
And if he kept thinking about the folks belonging to him
He couldn’t do it
And then he wouldn’t be any good to them
Or himself either.
There they went into the woods
The folks belonging to him gone
Gone for good
And they not knowing it
But he knowing it
Yes God
He knowing it well.

When the head deputy got back
With three more deputies for help
But not the High Sheriff
There were forty men in Cliff James’ cabin
All armed.
The head deputy and the others got out of the car
And started up the slope toward the cabin.
Behind the dark windows
The men didn’t know were there
Sighted their guns.
Then the deputies stopped.
“You Cliff James!” the head deputy shouted
“come on out
we want to talk with you.”
No answer from inside.
“Come out Cliff
we got something we want to talk over.”
Maybe they really did have something to talk over
Cliff James thought
Maybe all those men inside
Wouldn’t have to die for him or he for them…
“I’s goin’s out” he said.
“No you ain’t” Ned Cobb said.
“Yes I is” Cliff James said
and leaning his shotgun against the wall
he opened the door just a wide enough crack
for himself to get through
but Ned Cobb crowded in behind him
and came out too
without his gun
and shut the door.
Together they walked toward the Laws.
When they were halfway Cliff James stopped
And Ned stopped with him
And Cliff called out to the laws
“I’s ready to listen white folks.”

“This is what we got to say nigger!”
and the head deputy whipped out his pistol.
The first shot got Ned
And the next two got Cliff in the back
As he was dragging Ned to the cabin.
When they were in the shooting started from inside
Everybody crowding up to the windows
With their old shotguns and muskets
Not minding the pistol bullets from the Laws.
Of a sudden John McMullen
Broke out of the door
Meaning to make a run for his house
And tell his and Cliff James’ folks
To get a long way away
But a bullet got him in the head
And he fell on his face
Among the dead cotton plants
And his life’s blood soaked into the old red land.

The room was full of powder smoke and men groaning
That had not caught pistol bullets
But not Cliff James.
He lay in the corner quiet
Feeling the blood run down his backs and legs
But when somebody shouted
“The Laws is runnin’ away!”
he got to his feet and went to the door and opened it.
Sure enough three of the Laws
Were helping the fourth one into the car
But it wasn’t the head deputy.
There by the door-post was John McMullen’s old musket
Where he’d left it when he ran out and got killed.
Cliff picked it up and saw it was still loaded.
He raised it and steadied it against the door-post
Aiming at where the head deputy would be sitting
To drive the car.
Cliff only wished
He could shoot that thing like John McMullen…

IV.

He didn’t know there was such a place in all Alabama
Just for colored.
They put him in a room to himself
With a white bed and white sheets
And the black nurse put a white gown on his black body
After she washed off the dried black blood.
Then the black doctor came

And looked at the pistol bullet holes in his back
And put white bandages on
And stuck a long needle in his arm
And went away.

How long was it
He stayed and shot it out with the Laws?
Seemed like a long time
But come to think of it
He hid out in Mr Sam’s corn crib
Till the sun went down that evening
Then walked and walked all the night-time
And when it started to get light he saw a cabin
With smoke coming out the chimney
But the woman wouldn’t let him in to get warm
So he went on in the woods and lay down
Under an old gum tree and covered himself with leaves
And when he woke up it was nearly night-time again
And there were six buzzards perched in the old gum tree
Watching him…
Then he got up and shooed the buzzards away
And walked all the second night-time
And just as it was getting light
He was here
And this was Tuskegee
Where the Laws couldn’t find him
But John McMullen was dead in the cotton field
And the buzzards would be at him by now
If nobody hadn’t buried him
And who would there be to bury him
With everybody shot or run away hiding?
In a couple of days it was going to be Christmas
Yes Christmas
And nobody belonging to Cliff James
Was going to get a thing
Not so much as an orange or a candy stick
For the littlest boy.
What kind of Christmas was that
When a man didn't even have a few nickels
To get his children some oranges and candy sticks
What kind of Christmas and what kind of country anyway
When you made ten bales of cotton
Five thousand pounds of cotton
With your own hands
And you wife's hands
And all your children's hands
And then the Laws came to take your mules away
And drive your cows to sell in town
And your calves
And your heifer
And you couldn't even get commissary credit
For coffee molasses and sow-belly
And nobody in your house had shoes to wear
Or any kind of fitting Sunday clothes
And no Christmas for nobody…
“Go down Moses” was the song they sang
and when they finished singing
it was so quiet in the church
you could hear the branch splashing over the rocks
right out behind.
Then the preacher go up and he preached…

“And there was a man what fought to save us all
he wrapped an old quilt around him
because it was wintertime and he had two pistol bullets in his back
and he went out of his house
and he started walking across the country to Tuskegee.
He got mighty cold
And his bare feet pained him
And his back like to killed him
And he thought
Here is a cabin with smoke coming out the chimney
And they will let me in to the fire
Because they are just poor folks like me
And when I got warm
I will be on my way to Tuskegee
But the woman was afeared
And barred the door against him
And he went and piled leaves over him in the woods
Waiting for the night-time
And six buzzards settled in an old gum tree
Watching did he still breathe…”

The Sheriff removed Cliff James from the hospital to the county
Jail on December 22. A mob gathered to lynch the prisoner on
Christmas day. For protection he was taken to jail in Montgomery.
Here Cliff James died on the stone floor of his cell, December 27, 1932.