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Black bus workers fight “plantation” conditions

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An article by Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin about discrimination in the Chattanooga Area Regional Transportation Authority. Originally appeared in the *Industrial Worker* #1589 (March 1996)

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Ralph Williams is a city bus driver for the Chattanooga Area Regional Transportation Authority (CARTA) in Chattanooga, Tenn. He has worked for the bus company for almost ten years, and in that time has seen all kinds of racial discrimination, both in hiring and disciplinary practices. He has seen every Black worker who spoke out against company policies harassed and fired. Conditions are so bad that Black workers call CARTA “the plantation” and chafe at being treated as nothing but slaves. In 1993, however, all this began to change when a Black worker — James Jones, who was fired because of his wife’s civil right activism — wouldn’t take his dismissal lying down and filed a discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. This was apparently the first such complaint filed, and it shook up the company and its racially biased management.

Jones then began to encourage other CARTA employees to complain about the many cases of racial discrimination and to take their cases to court.

Ralph Williams was one of those who did so. He had already filed a complaint with a city "Human Rights" agency, and this simple act of filing a grievance earned him the eternal hatred of the CARTA management. They targeted him for harassment and job termination; on one occasion they said to his face that they would fire him "just like James Jones." However this threat did not intimidate Ralph. He began to keep a daily journal of the acts of management harassment against him and send it to EEOC and other agencies as proof of illegal retaliation. But nothing was done to protect him.

In 1994 Ralph filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against CARTA for discrimination and harassment. The company then began to follow him on his routes, scream at him over the two-way radio, and file a series of bogus disciplinary reports which caused him to lose days off and paid hours. They hoped to pressure him to give up and resign, or to pad his record with false reports which would justify his firing. None of that worked, however, and Ralph continued to report for duty each day without fail — and with a smile on his face! Company officials were extremely frustrated because they had never had anyone fight them so hard, and yet remain so cool in the face of their outrageous daily provocations.

Ralph held on for years, and he began to organize on the job. He got other workers to file complaints when they were mistreated, including a number of Black women subjected to sexual pressure from the corrupt "union" president and a company vice president. He enlisted a number of labor-based groups to write complaint letters. And it did stop the severity of the harassment for a while, but then management got desperate to stop this on-the-job unity and really bore down on anyone who stood up. Some people unfortunately folded and went into a shell, and some sold out entirely.

Even though the harassment by the company wore the women down and they dropped their EEOC charges, Ralph never wavered. In 1995 he and a group of Black passengers,

organized as the “Chattanooga Bus Riders Union,” filed a complaint with the federal Department of Transportation alleging that the bus company was engaged in racial discrimination in its employment and disciplinary practices, routing and overall operations. The complaint asked that all federal grants earmarked for the company be terminated.

After the DOT failed to act, the Bus Riders Union and several CARTA employees filed a lawsuit in federal court charging these same issues, and seeking a court injunction against a proposed fare hike which would hurt poor and elderly riders. This really marked Ralph for harassment by management, and he was given a number of bogus disciplinary reports along with numerous days off without pay, and told that if he did “anything else” against company rules he would be summarily fired.

Even in the face of this threat, Ralph continued to organize. He filed a complaint for unfair labor practices against the company and its lapdog “union,” local 1212 of the Amalgamated Transit Union, with the National Labor Relations Board, and filed another lawsuit over the harassment. Seeing that they would never stop him by legal means, someone sympathetic to the company decided to use outright terrorism to shut him up.

In the early morning hours of January 5, an arsonist spread gasoline on his front porch and set his house on fire, literally burning it down to the ground. Fortunately Ralph was not there that night or he might have been killed in his bed. An arson investigator from the fire department told him it was definitely arson. He asked Ralph who it was he had made so mad? Ralph told him “only those clowns I work for.” The cops and FBI refused to investigate. In that small town the cops tend to cover up for the dirty work of prominent citizens, killer cops and major corporations — especially when it comes to the rights of Black people.

Of course, Ralph does not know who actually committed the fire, but he knows who had a motive: his employers at CARTA and the company labor union. Ralph has lost everything he owned, but he continues to fight on even in the face of new threats to his life. He wants to install a new union and drive out the corrupt union officials, so a real union would bring an end to these types of injustices against workers. Ralph is very strong, but he should not have to fight alone. Everyone of us who believes in racial justice, and that a worker has a right to organize and protest company misconduct on his job, should join in his fight.

Many workers in Chattanooga are even more frightened now to say anything because of this act of terrorism. Clearly he needs our help, and we should give it to him. The terrorists cannot be allowed to succeed in silencing this symbol of the best that unionism is all about. If he is crushed the workforce there has no hope at all.

What can you do?

1. Write, fax, or telephone a complaint to CARTA company management to protest this harassment of Ralph Williams and other Black/female workers. Send these complaints to the head of the company and to the union at the same address: Tom Dugan, CEO, CARTA, 1716 Wilcox Avenue, Chattanooga TN 37404 Tel: 615/629-1411 fax: 615/698-2749
2. All of Ralph's furniture, food and clothing, along with his word processor and papers, were destroyed in the fire and must be replaced. Send funds to Ralph Williams at: Workers Aid Fund, c/o Atlanta WSA, 673 Wylie St. SE, Atlanta GA 30316-1162. Please send funds in U.S. currency only.

3. Write to Ralph and tell him you stand with him in this fight, send copies of your protest letters to: Ralph Williams, 2506 E. 3rd Street, Chattanooga TN 37404

Let's take a stand against racism and the harassment of workers!

— **Lorenzo Komboa Ervin**