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North Carolina Justice (1929)

In 1929 Gaston County, North Carolina, had more textile plants than any other county in the nation. The Loray Mill was the largest in the South. At its peak, the mill employed thirty-five hundred workers, almost half of them women. During 1927 and 1928, however, the workforce was slashed. Those who kept their jobs were required to work longer hours (eleven hours a day, six days a week) and tend more machines for lower wages (averaging about \$15 a week for men; \$6 a week for women). On April 1, 1929, over one thousand exhausted Loray workers walked off the job. They were encouraged to do so by the National Textile Workers Union (NTWU). Local officials were outraged that mill workers were collaborating with "northern" communists. Equally shocking was the large number of young women among the strikers. In the fall of 1929 the strike at the Loray Mill turned violent. A vigilante group assaulted a group of strikers and killed twenty-nine-year-old Ella May Wiggins, a longtime labor activist, poet, and folk singer. Northern journalists who covered the trial of the murder suspects insisted that the trial was a farce; the North Carolina authorities were prejudiced against the strikers. The following article from the New Republic condemns the state's legal system for failing to bring the murderers to justice.

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Nobody is to be indicted for the murder of Ella May Wiggins, the "poet laureate of the union," who was shot down on the highway between Gastonia and South Gastonia, N.C., on September 14. I hardly imagine there is anybody who expected that the Grand Jury of Gaston County would return a true bill [of indictment] for the wanton assassination of this unfortunate woman. Certainly I did not expect any such result as I sat in the little courtroom last month and listened to the coroner's inquest into the affair. County Solicitor Carpenter himself made it clear enough what the ultimate result would be. His examination of the men charged with pursuing the truckload of Union organizers, forcing it off the road and then shooting into the crowded truck, was distinguished by such sharp and remorseless questions as "You didn't have

a gun with you, did you?" or "Weren't lookin' for any trouble, were you?"

One of the International Labor Defense lawyers, who tried to interject a little real cross-examination of the men, was told to "keep out of this." The manager of the Manville-Jenckes Company went bail for all. Everybody was happy. The unionites, however, postponed the funeral of Ella May for fear of another shooting. Murder is sometimes a crime in North Carolina. A "speakin'" by union organizers always is.

This strange lack of proportion pervades the whole attitude of North Carolina toward this labor disturbance. . . . The Charlotte newspaper man who told me that there was going to be a whipping every time there was speakin' [on behalf of the union] had substantially the right information. "The people

over there in Gastonia aren't going to tolerate these Red bastards and you can put that in your paper," he told me. "And nobody is going to be convicted for these whipping parties," he added. "You might as well have all the fun you can get out of these hearings because that's all there'll be to it." It is unreasonable to demand moral indignation in a journalist, but I wish I could report that this was said at least with regret over the state of mind of a community which has so succumbed to a frenzy that it has come to regard soapbox oratory as a high crime, and murder as a misdemeanor which can be forgotten when "everything blows over." But my journalistic friend wasn't horrified at all. He was like most of the people you meet down there, who talk to you superciliously on this question just as they talk about the Negro question—as if an outsider couldn't understand their "peculiar local problem."

. . . Another newspaper man, also a North Carolinian, ran squarely against Gastonia respectability when he tried to provide a bail for a girl among the unionists who had been arrested on the charge of possessing liquor. The bail bond was for \$100, and the scribe was willing to provide it. However, although everybody in the town knew him and his responsibility was unquestioned, he was not allowed to write a check to accompany the bond. The court had to have the money. And when he told people what he wanted a check cashed for, several refused to cash it and accused him of being a Red himself. . . .

Sometimes I wish I could believe that the North Carolina mob was really out of hand. Mob spirit is fearful to contemplate, but it is passionate and uncalculating. The bourgeoisie of Gaston County tell you the population is so inflamed with hatred toward the Communists that "anything may happen." I don't believe it. I have seen the proletariat of Gastonia, and I doubt if they are ever inflamed on any subject more serious than the number of flapjacks necessary for breakfast. It has

required some healthy blow-torches to set those embers glowing.

The *Gastonia Gazette*, with its constant references to the Christ-like patience of Gastonia in the face of provocations [by striking workers and union leaders], which it then proceeded to describe in incendiary fashion, doubtless contributed to the continuation of mob rage, and some of the gentry who told me with long faces how hard it was to "hold the boys in" had their fingers crossed. One such reminded me, after Ella May [Wiggins] had been killed, "how much worse a thing like that looks in the paper than what it really was." He said that in the courtroom, which was full of his fellow-citizens who were accused of wantonly shooting down a helpless woman. He might have said, "What's all this fuss about a striker?" He chuckled and said, "You can't tell what the boys'll do when they get all rared up," as if they had stolen the front gate off the parsonage fence.

It was Samuel Butler, I believe, who wanted to know why sexual immorality in English fiction is so much more seriously condemned than homicide. North Carolina might ask herself by what processes of mind has she come to consider a ragged little Union meeting so much more criminal than murder, kidnapping, flogging, false arrest and arson. I don't see how her citizens can ask themselves such a question without seeing the necessity of a quick march out of the bog of ethical confusion in which these labor troubles have mired them.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In such a charged atmosphere, was it possible to prosecute the murderers of Ella May Wiggins? Explain.
2. In what respects does the trial resemble the famous Sacco-Vanzetti case?