

Southern Strategy, Inc. And Cheap Labor

by Marianna Wertz

The Nixon “Southern Strategy” was also carried out by American business interests, allied to the GOP, who wanted to break the strength of the unions. Unions had grown strong by the 1960s and early ’70s, particularly in the auto and steel industries, with the mass influx of 5 million black workers, who migrated from the South to the North between 1940 and 1970 and into those high-paying, relatively skilled industrial jobs.

General Motors spearheaded its “Southern Strategy,” as GM called it in the 1960s and 1970s, by opening up virtually duplicate auto plants in Southern, non-union states, while closing down the original plants in the North. When that strategy was defeated by the unions’ organizing drives into the South, GM and other business giants launched their *maquiladora* cheap-labor operation in Mexico and South America, under the auspices of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Carlton Horner, Sr. was National Coordinator of the Organizing Department of the United Auto Workers (UAW) from 1981 to 1994; and earlier, from 1964 to 1970, UAW political director in the Southwest, responsible for Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas, and New Mexico, and thus in charge of the UAW organizing drive for the 14 new plants that GM built in the South. “We got all those plants brought under the UAW/GM national agreement,” Horner told *EIR*. “Some of the elections we won, and after we won several of them, then GM decided to start giving us automatic recognition in the others, after we had beat them in Louisiana, in Georgia, and Oklahoma City, at the big assembly plants.”

Horner said that he had become convinced during those drives, that GM did not actually need all the plants that they had built throughout the South. “Every plant was a duplication of an existing plant. For an example, we won the election in Monroe, Louisiana on Dec. 22, 1976. That was our first win at GM in the South. That plant was a guide lamp division. Well, that work came out of the guide lamp plant in Anderson, Indiana. It was where they built all the headlights for General Motors. That work came out of the existing plant in Anderson.”

After the UAW had organized a Southern plant, Horner said, GM would sell it six to eight years later. “They wouldn’t have had the nerve to do it immediately, because the UAW would have racked them up. They had to wait a reasonable amount of time. But this was part of an ongoing pattern.”

As they sold their Southern plants, Horner said, GM built

maquiladoras in Mexico, then later in Argentina and Brazil, where their cars could be manufactured at even cheaper wages than they paid their non-union workers in the North American South.

At the political launch of the Southern Strategy in 1972, there were 196,000 inmates in America’s state and Federal prisons, and 130,000 in local jails. Today, there are more than 2 million men and women in America’s prisons and jails, a more than sixfold increase in less than 30 years. The rate of incarceration has jumped from approximately 97 per 100,000 population in 1972, to 645 per 100,000 population in 2000, or about one of every 155 Americans incarcerated today.

This mass incarceration policy is a product of the “Southern Strategy,” launched during the Nixon Administration and escalated by every succeeding President, Democrat and Republican. Richard Nixon’s 1968 campaign heralded the theme of “law and order” for the first time in a national political context, playing off rising urban unrest and antiwar protest. The result was the phony “war on drugs,” which resulted in filling the nation’s prisons with able-bodied members of the working population; and such policies as “indeterminate sentencing” and the abandonment of parole and of the concept of rehabilitation for prisoners. Lengthy sentences and a warehousing approach to prisons opened the door to the establishment of virtual slave labor camps inside American prisons, which today produce billions of dollars in goods and services, everything from missile parts to all the furniture and clothing used by the Federal government, and from airline ticket sales to hotel registrations.

An integral part of this Southern Strategy for prisons was the launching, in the 1980s, of the now-burgeoning—and already notorious—private prison movement, where private business not only operates plants in prisons, but operates the prisons themselves for profit. The 11 old Confederate states are home to almost 70% of all prisoners in private facilities, and over 95% of all private prison facilities and detention centers in the United States are owned or operated by Southern prison corporations—led by Tennessee-based Corrections Corporation of America, and Texas-based Wackenhut Corp. George W. Bush’s Texas, of course, leads the nation in this enterprise as well.

The Southern states, particularly Texas and Virginia, are also the leading “importing” states for prisons and prisoners, because the capital costs of building new prisons are lower, and the cost of keeping prisoners per diem is lower in these non-union states.

A truly hideous example is Wackenhut’s current plan to build a private, 1,320-bed prison on the site of the old Vann plantation in North Carolina—one of the largest Confederate slave plantations in the state. Only this time, Wackenhut will house 1,200 inmates from the District of Columbia, almost all black, who will be imprisoned on the same plantation where African Americans, possibly including some of their own ancestors, were held as slaves 150 years ago.