

# Fred Bass and the Norman Case

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ORLANDO, FLA.

THE day after I arrived in Orlando, the welcoming committee of the Chamber of Commerce bid me feel at home. She was a pleasant, garrulous old lady who offered to connect me with the best churches and clubs and introduce me to some of the city's "better elements."

"That's very nice," I said. "I would like to get in touch with a Mr. Fred Bass. I understand he is quite prominent around here."

"Oh, *very*," she exclaimed. "Fred Bass is one of our most outstanding figures. He wears one of those hats that Irvin Cobb made so popular — ten-gallon hats I think they call them. He's a great big man, well over six feet and weighs close to two hundred pounds. He'll be glad to see you. He's glad to see anyone. We call him 'Rough and Ready Bass' in Orlando—" she giggled — "because he's always ready to do anything."

With this introduction, I admit Fred Bass' office disappointed me. I expected at least a mahogany desk and numerous filing cabinets. But the great man's headquarters are rather dismal; he sits in Pete the Tailor's shop, behind a screen of flannel, serge, herring-bone and worsted suitings. In this alcove Fred Bass receives the endless procession of satellites. And in turn, they learn what Fred Bass has in mind for them. For Fred Bass is something of a power in Orlando. He's Kleagle of the Klan. He's chairman of the Americanization Committee of the American Legion. And he has also earned the title of Red-baiter extraordinary, of terrorist par excellence, of petty politician and would-be office holder, of master whipper and expert bully.

When I arrived at the tailor shop, Mr. Bass' voice filled the room with loud commands to his lieutenants to hurry up and get things organized—whether for the American Legion or the Klan I did not learn. Finally, he summoned me behind the screen. At his elbow rested the hat, Fred Bass' symbol of power, tannish grey with a thin, neat band round it. We shook hands; Mr. Bass, an immense man who evidently is the local fashion plate when it comes to gaudy shirts, looked down at me through quiet pig-eyes. His jowls sagged under his jaw and the whole meaty countenance glowed with the high color of a heavy eater.

"I'm a journalist, Mr. Bass," I said. "I'm trying to get material on the local situation. I know you are pretty much in touch with things and I thought you could help me out on a few points."

Mr. Bass rubbed his nose. "Well, now," he said. "I'm hardly the man—"

"That's very modest, Mr. Bass. But anything you can tell me—perhaps some information on the Klan?"

He tilted back in the chair, shoving his hands into his pockets. "You fellers up No'th got the wrong idea about the Klan," he began. "I'm Kleagle in these parts. You fellers think we're sort of against the other guy's religion. That ain't a bit true. I can say honestly that some of my closest associates, people I admire more 'n I do many others, are Jews and Catholics. Yes, suh, I can say that. 'Course, no one's goin' to stand for a Catholic bein' President of this great country. Y'see, the Pope, he's plannin' to move to Washington in that case. That's the danger. You fellers up No'th don't know these things, any more'n you know that all a nigger wants is t'sleep with a white woman. That's his life's ambition. Not a thing else—only to get a white woman. And they know what that means if they're caught."

"That sounds pretty progressive," I said. "Aren't you the chairman of the Americanization Committee too, Mr. Bass?"

He nodded, pleased. "Yes, suh. I considers that our most important work. We're out for the Reds. They threaten the whole South. Thousands of 'em—" he stretched his arms wide. "Y'know, this might seem hard to believe, but they wanted ten dollars a week relief. *Ten dollars*—yes suh, and Uncle Sam was to foot the bill. That's the God's own truth." He leaned forward, very intent. "I'm the one that broke 'em up. I can say that honestly. I broke up the Unemployment Council and anyone in Orlando can tell you Fred Bass gets the credit."

"I suppose that's a feather in your hat. What about this stuff I hear about the Klan taking care of morals?"

"Well," Mr. Bass relaxed, studying his shoes. "We believe in decent living. Anyone who can't live like a person should, we see to it they learn. That's if they're Klan members. Otherwise, we bring a little pressure on the police. The sheriff knows any time he needs men, all he has to do is ring up Fred Bass and inside an hour he has five hundred men. 'Course, sometimes it's necessary to take the law in our hands. We string up a nigger now and then—f'r an example like. Not officially, but it comes to the same thing. Over in Lakeland, a fellow named No'man—Frank No'man—he got foolin' round with niggers and unions and he got the works. I don't think he's dead—" Fred Bass paused, looking at me as though he couldn't make up his mind whether or not he should wink. "But this No'man was a Red. I can honestly say that. Sometimes we gotta show people what we think of those stinkin' trouble-makers."

He talked on. He was planning to run for sheriff. He'd clean up Orlando—"The City Beautiful"—where every other hot-dog stand owner insists that waitresses go in for prostitution on the side and let the management in on a cut of the proceeds.

"What about President Roosevelt?" I asked.

"He's okay," Bass answered. "I can honestly say that. It's the goddamned Comoonistic Brain Trusters—y'know, Mrs. Dilling was about right. Tugwell, Ickes, that guy Wallace, they're all Comoonists. And Farley, he's a Catholic. Things're in a helluva mess. Look at Gov'nor Scholtz." Bass prodded my knee. "If you get to Tallahassee, you give that Jew bastard a message. Say it's from Fred Bass of Orlando. He knows me. Tell him that Fred Bass says he can—"

FRED BASS is just a big friendly thug. The most powerful toady the citrus growers have. The most generally despised man in Orange County—and you can throw in Polk County for good measure. He directs a state-wide organization that supplies whippers and terrorists on short notice. The owners and bankers and the big business men know how to use Fred Bass—he does their jobs thoroughly. Fred Bass is the Pearl Bergoff of Florida.

He's Kleagle of the Klan. Every now and then the members put on their sheets and parade the streets. The big kick is to invade the Negro quarter on the outskirts of town. The Negroes are apt to be scared. They remember past experiences; some of the boys might get mischievous and burn the quarter down. Of course, it's all in fun. Maybe some of the more lively Klansmen will whip a few Negroes, or if their spirits run real high, lynch an innocent man. That's just to remind the Negroes that white men are superior beings with souls and that Negroes have no soul.

The Klan has a definite program, a program that is most desirable if you look at it from the point of view of a grower or a banker. The categories of hate are convenient prejudices to be played upon when labor becomes restive or thinks of organizing, or when the Negroes show signs of growing tired of the unremitting oppression. Then the powers call in a man like Fred Bass and tell him that one or the other of the Klan's prejudices has been flaunted and then Fred Bass musters the terrorist artillery.

A year ago the Klan went on a rampage, until the sight of fiery crosses and reports of beatings so outraged the citizenry that the Klan decided to lie low for a while. Its hold on politics remains; it can still blackmail

workers into the Klan organization. A man in search of a job had better join up, pay the ten-dollar initiation fee and his dues of six dollars a year, if he wants to land a job and hold it. Hence the considerable number of workers in the Klan. Policies are made from above. Democracy is a great ideal but the Klan officialdom isn't so short-sighted as to allow democratic procedure at meetings or when it comes to drafting Klan programs.

The fact is, workers in Florida remain among the most backward in America. They still fall for the anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, anti-foreign-born, anti-Red propaganda. Florida is wholly—with negligible exceptions—an unindustrialized, agricultural state. A union movement worthy of the name does not exist. Groping attempts to form unions have been met by immediate terror, organized, unrelenting. Workers have been unable to resist it.

The exception is Tampa. In the cigar factories, where most of the labor is Cuban, Mexican, Spanish, the workers have carried over revolutionary traditions from the countries of their birth. They have been through terror before; they understand its meaning and motivation. Yet even in Tampa, the Klan has power. Just last week, three militants were picked up by police for "investigation"—they were reported to be Communists. They were arrested at night, under a Florida law that allows the police to hold a man on "suspicion," to hold him incommunicado for seventy-two hours without placing a formal charge against him. After the three men were "questioned" they were told to get out—not all at once, but one at a time. It was well-timed. The police cooperated with the mob. Outside, the Klan waited. Masked men seized each released suspect, rushed him into a car, took them to the waterfront and then swerved toward the wilderness. Dozens of cars followed. The men were dragged out, stripped. The "defenders of the Constitution" beat them, not with canvas straps as the Florida papers reported, but with rubber hose and iron chains. Shoemaker, one of the three victims, recognized Policeman Berry among the gang. He was beaten even more viciously than the others. The mutilated men were tarred and feathered and left by the roadside. When they were found, their condition was critical, not only from the treatment but from exposure. Shoemaker will probably not live.

The unions that now exist in Lakeland and Orlando are split on a craft basis. The Klan has a large voice in the federal unions—affiliated directly to the A. F. of L. with offices in Washington and not, like the international unions, autonomous. I met several local officials—crafty, shrewd little men, in the labor movement for what they could get out of it for themselves, filled with Klan prejudices. They look to Fred Bass or men like him for orders. Fred Bass drops in on the banker or the largest grove owner or the principal packer to find out what they think would be a good way of going about things. And it seems that the wishes of those on top

is to keep one union isolated from the next, to have no dealings with the unemployed, to prevent any effort to organize relief workers and the unskilled.

A year ago, the unemployed did organize despite opposition. Two thousand joined the Unemployment Council. A strike of F.E.R.A. workers received sympathetic support of the Council, who advanced its own demands—ten dollars a week for the unemployed, three dollars additional relief for each dependant, free medical care, a hall to meet in, free milk for starving children. The owners didn't like it. Mr. Swope, head of local relief and a government employe, warned the unemployed to be careful or he'd see to it that they got what was coming to them—a threat he evidently backed up as he was recognized among the members of a whipping party that beat Broadwell, local organizer. At least, that is the story that one man after another whispered to me. When Broadwell identified his assailants in court, the judge threw out the case. Mr. Ferguson, campaigning for better government, was fired on by the Klan, the bullets lodging in his car. Mr. Bruni, local A.F. of L. organizer who had the courage to oppose such men as Bass, was shot at as he stood on the porch of his home. The buckshot ripped away a substantial piece of porch rail. Mr. Jackson, member of the federal union, militant supporter of the unemployed's action, was continually threatened with death. Cars passed and repassed his house each night: systematic intimidation which continues even today.

Yet the terror didn't stop the Unemployment Council. The mayor of Orlando was worried. There remained but one thing to do, call in Bass. "Rough and Ready" was just the man; hadn't he stated publicly, "Too bad there ain't some more phosphate pits in Orange County like there is in Polk County to bury some of these goddamned labor agitators in." Bass, the tall, heavy Klansman, might have been thinking of Frank Norman. It's hard to know just whom else he could have in mind when he remarked, "Some people have been taken out after dark and never returned home."

So the mayor chose Bass to break up the Unemployment Council. "Rough and Ready" went down to the park where a mass meeting was in session, picked a fight with the leader, got up on the platform and announced, "The mayor will do anything for me I ask him to. Let me handle this. You appoint a committee and I'll lead 'em to the mayor."

The members hesitated. "We already have a committee."

"Well, boys," said Bass, "follow me."

They followed him. He looked back and his jaw dropped. "Say," he bellowed. "You can't do this t' me. I'm not goin' to the mayor with a lot of goddamned niggers on the committee." And he strode off, Klan pride in revolt.

He didn't stay away long. He got over his anti-Negro feeling for the time being

when he realized that here was a chance to break up a militant organization. After all, Klan pride demands carrying out such a task. Coupled with Swope, the head of federal relief for the county, Bass convinced the workers that ten dollars a week was too much relief. With the Red scare at its height, Bass and Swope disbanded the Unemployment Council, purged it of the militants, formed the "Square-Deal Association" to "care for" the workers. It cared for them—they woke up and found their organization smashed and the Klan riding high in the saddle.

And that was that. Little organization exists today in the citrus belt. Workers realize their mistake. They are beginning to look for guidance. It takes time to uproot prejudices. The anti-Negro propaganda must still be overcome. That remains the Klan's chief talking point. But in the citrus strike and in the strike of the unemployed, white workers learned that Negroes wouldn't scab. That opened their eyes. They are beginning to consider the Negro not an enemy but a potential ally on the picket line. They are only in the first stage of this reorientation. The wedge has entered, ever so slightly, cracking the supposedly impregnable surface. Things can move fast as starvation and oppression begin to teach elementary lessons.

NOT all labor organizers in the citrus belt are dominated by the Klan. One in particular had much to say on the situation in central Florida. "I'm no Communist," he assured me so that I would not misunderstand him. "I don't go the full way with those fellows. But I believe in the labor movement and the United Front. I believe that the bureaucracy of the A.F. of L. with its insistence on craft unionism as opposed to industrial unionism finds its worst results in a backward state like Florida. Even when we get organization in one union, we cannot get cooperation. One union's insulated from the other—it's hard to break through."

He stood fingering the crimson flowers of an hybiscus bush.

"You see," he admitted a little shamefacedly, "once I believed in the New Deal. I was taken in. But even supporting the New Deal labeled me a Red down there. They've spied on me ever since. When I started to organize unskilled labor—then I ran into real trouble. And the officials of the A.F. of L. up in Washington wouldn't move a finger to help me. They don't do a thing to get the field workers or the unskilled laborers. We have to fight our own organization as well as the Klan and Legion."

"I gather you favor a Labor Party. What chance has it got in Florida?"

"Sure, I believe in it, but—" he hesitated. "Time's not ripe here. We've gotta build unemployed organizations. As it is, there's no use talking Labor Party when we haven't the ghost of a chance of getting on the ballot. Takes 30-percent vote of the whole elec-

torate in the preceding election to get on the ballot in this state. They nearly squeezed the Republicans off. What we need is mass organization to change that law—we gotta start from the bottom. They're backward here." He shook his head. "Backward as all hell. They fall for the back-slapping of some guy like Bass who's only a front for the bosses. He shakes their hand and gives 'em a cigar and then turns round and robs 'em of relief and wages and anything else that's left over. A smile from a King is breakfast for a fool."

At the relief office—situated in the most important bank building in Orlando—Mr. Swope the director refused to talk to me. He was much too busy and he didn't like reporters. He didn't give a damn what I wanted, he had nothing to conceal but he wasn't going to see reporters. "Go to my assistant," he snapped. "Only don't hang round here botherin' me."

The assistant had been trained at the Russell Sage Foundation. He kept taking off his glasses and then putting them on again, nervous, hesitant, anxious to assure me that he wasn't responsible for the way things went. He only carried out orders. He merely did what he was told.

"We haven't got elaborate statistics like you have in New York," he remarked hurriedly. "I don't know how much information I can give—"

"That's all right," I assured him. "You'll have what I want to know. What is the W.P.A. quota for Florida?"

"Thirty-five thousand."

"And how many unemployed would you say are able to work and are eligible for relief?"

He began turning over papers on the desk. "That's a hard question—"

"Well, just a rough estimate."

"Sixty-five thousand."

"And when does direct relief from the government end?"

"They say December 1—that is, I'm not sure it will—"

"So there remain thirty thousand with no visible means of support. Any state appropriations?"

He took his glasses off and rubbed them. "No."

"What happens to the thirty thousand who aren't given relief? And to the unemployables?"

The glasses went back on his nose. "I don't know."

"Now could you tell me the scale of wages?"

"Well, they're not bad down here," he said. "They range from twenty-five dollars a month for unskilled to fifty dollars a month for skilled."

"In all counties?"

"Well, not in all. Some range from nineteen to thirty-five dollars a month."

"And what about direct relief?"

"Now that's a problem." He removed the glasses holding them up to the light. "It's not what you—that is, it's not what Northerners call high. Fifty cents to seventy-five cents a week, with a nickel and sometimes twenty-five cents added for each dependent. Of course," he added, "when we get it, we give out commodities—prunes, flour, beef."

"Can a man, can a family live on such relief? Even with the commodities, granting for the moment they are available?"

He squirmed, rustling the papers. "I don't know," he mumbled. "I don't know. They seem to do it."

A BEAUTIFUL state, Florida, with its semi-tropical flowers, the oaks with their garlands of Spanish moss, the graceful palms, the wild mysterious swamps full of game. A state where the boom left cities in the middle of the plain with not a person living in the stucco hotels and apartments, with unused streets running straight out into the forest, with sidewalks on which the cows can stand while they feed on the grass growing in the gutters. A state where the "cracker" and the Negro are in the same boat, though the "cracker" doesn't know it.

In the Everglades, far back from the main road, I met a "half-cropper," a farmer who worked land rented by a city partner and whose expenses were paid for one year by the partner. At the end of the year, whatever was made was shared half and half. The

farmer had his wife and child on a land sled, a rough platform on runners, pulled by a horse, that made it possible to get through the swamp and across the plain. We talked about farming, about his difficulty in getting crops to the canning plant, about the loneliness of existence so far away from town or village.

"What about prices?" I wanted to know.

He shrugged. "They're not up, I knowed that. Last week I bring tomatoes in to the plant and they want t'pay me a price which didn't even pay me for givin' up a day o' work bringin' 'em in. So I tells 'em to go to hell. Them tomatoes should of gone to the poor, but I don't know how t'go about doin' it. So I dumped 'em down the way. No damn city company's goin' t'make a profit offen me!"

He paused, squinting at me. "Many others feel that way?" I asked.

"Well—" he seemed undecided what to say. "Tell the truth, lots of crackers round here are gettin' to feel pretty much like me. Things ain't much better, we c'n tell that. One o' these days a bunch of us are goin' to sort of get together and then those packers 'll pay us what we want or they won't get anything to pack. No, suh." He picked up the reins. "Won't get one tomato. They can't run them plants without us. 'N once we get together—"

He didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he slapped the horse with the reins and started down the road.



"Look at Captain Sharpomenn and Young Hans!"  
"Well, Roehm wasn't made in a day you know!"

Wolfe

# United Front Opens Herndon's Jail

*("I'm Dead Sure You'll Get Me Out Soon")*

JOSEPH NORTH

"You know," he said to me a block or so away from the courthouse, "the nearer I get to the court, the nearer I feel freedom. I'm dead sure the united front'll get me out soon. Funny isn't it? The nearer I get to Fulton Tower, this time, the nearer I feel to freedom." He was silent a moment and then grinned. "That's dialectics, I guess, isn't it?"

—From "Herndon Is Back in Atlanta" in  
THE NEW MASSES, November 5, 1935.

**A**FTER Angelo Herndon said "so long" and walked up the courthouse stairs to give himself up to twenty years on a Georgia chain gang the authorities took him over to Fulton Tower and put him in Big Rock with thirty-two murderers. They have taken six of them out since Angelo came down, just six short weeks ago. A man a week to the electric chair. Georgia electrocuted them and they said good-bye to Herndon one by one as they went out the door for that last time.

They put Angelo Herndon in with murderers and condemned men because he had led a thousand starving people to ask for bread. The condemned men, the murderers, the two-gun men, looked up puzzled when the guards brought 22-year-old Angelo in with his armload of books. The authorities knew perfectly well what they were doing—this was the most turbulent wing in Fulton Tower and the men snarled at each other and fought with each other and plenty were stabbed in this barred, dark room where you could hear the 2,000 volts of electricity whirl on execution day. The big shots of Georgia thought the men would turn on Angelo one of these days and do a job for Georgia the authorities would love to have done. After Angelo came in there wasn't one fight, during the whole six weeks' period.

They kangarooed all newcomers, but the murderers and the two-gunmen looked Angelo over after the guards slammed the doors shut and they wanted to know what he was doing time for. One of the men spoke up and said he had heard Angelo while on his speaking tour in California and Angelo talked for the underdog. They scoffed at first and were impatient with a man who came 1,000 miles to give himself up to twenty years on the chain gang. They were no different than the editor of The Pittsburgh Courier, who had a cartoon drawn of a little figure in big chains and captioned it "Little Man, What Now?" when Angelo went down and surrendered.

The condemned men thought it over and decided Angelo wouldn't have to go on trial in kangaroo court and he would save the \$1.50 they charge every man for "breaking into jail."

They were black men, all of them, and they knew they were getting a dirty deal down there in sunny Dixie and they used to sing a song that started like this:

White folks call me nigger  
But that ain't none of my name  
When I get up in Heaven  
Gonna change that ugly name.

They asked Angelo to talk to them and explain some things to them. Angelo, graduate of a Workers' School in Chattanooga and member of the National Executive Committee of the Young Communist League, explained to the condemned men and they sat around and thought it over. One fellow who still had a chance for a pardon took Angelo aside and said, "Mr. Herndon, we have no foundation to build on; we colored people got no chance down here. I would like to know if I ever get out and go North could I go to night school?" The man had a wife and three children and he didn't want to believe he could never get out. For most of them felt that whoever entered that jail never walked out alive. When you did go out you were as good as dead, for the electric chair was at the other end of your walk.

Angelo walked out that door—but not to the electric chair.

Warden Turner had told me you would need to file through the recently-added twelve bars of "hard steel and soft steel" to break out of Fulton Tower. "No man done it yet." Angelo walked out that door and he didn't even have a finger nail file in his hands. The twenty six men condemned to die watched him go and they tried to figure it out.

The guard had come around, shortly after Judge Dorsey had ruled the insurrection law unconstitutional, on December 7, and had told Angelo to pack. "Get dressed, boy," he said. "You're going out." Angelo started packing his books but the guard said, "Hurry up, leave them damn books here, you got to leave fast."

"Go on, Angelo, dress," the condemned men said and they pitched in and packed up his stuff while Angelo donned his street clothes. They all crowded around to shake hands but the guard wouldn't give them a break. "Come along," he said, "you ain't got all day shakin' hands."

The Reverend, a man of 40, condemned to die for the murder of a woman, crowded forward. "I told you, Angelo," he said. "I knew it . . . knew it all along . . . I got a message from the Lawd." The Reverend had told Angelo he could commune with God, in fact he had seen God. Saw God in a Chicago police station once. God was blond and had blue eyes, wore police

riding boots and had a horseman's whip in his hands. "I can commune with God for you," he had told Angelo. "I can call God from here and get a message through to Him." In a prison cell you got to be real friendly even with a man with a glint in his eye and Angelo Herndon talked to the man who could get messages through to God.

When Angelo got the word to leave the Reverend beamed. He took it as a personal victory. "And stay out, son," he said. "Don't you ever let me catch you back here."

As Angelo walked down the corridors of gloomy old Fulton Tower he heard the condemned men singing the song they all sang over and over:

That old walker, walker [guard]  
Made me mad this mornin'  
About my time  
Lawd, Lawd  
About my time.

I gotta wife,  
Wife and three little chillen  
They're cryin' for bread  
Lawd,  
Cryin' for bread.

I'm gonna roll on, roll on  
A few days longer  
I'm goin' back home  
Oh, yes, I'm goin' back home.

If I had my, had my  
32-20  
I'd go today  
Lawd, Lawd,  
I'd go today.

He had referred to these songs in a letter written to a friend in the International Labor Defense which had organized the united-defense front about his case:

As per usual the boys are singing those songs—and to my own surprise I find that tears are dribbling from my eyes. I can hardly bear the thought of the thing—to sit and listen to condemned men singing songs that have words with so much meaning—and yet they don't realize it themselves. . . . I can understand how miserable the lives of those who were tortured during the Spanish inquisition must have been.

I, like them, am an outcast, a criminal, a murderer and everything else that is low and dirty—according to the thinking of my torturers. But I won't let that worry me. The day is fast approaching when the millions of robbed, exploited and downtrodden people will make the final and triumphant march against the real criminals, murderers and fiends who are skilled in the art of human torture . . . my whole life has been dedicated to that triumph—in spite of all the horrors I see today.

They set Herndon loose on \$8,000 bail and he had wiped his brow and walked