

New 'Hell Fire' Coughlins Try to Win Detroit's Many Southern Workers

By JOHN MELDON

Second of a Series

DETROIT, May 17. The Pulpit is a tremendous factor here. It can ultimately become a great force for good or evil. There are two types of preachers in Detroit. There is the honest, poor clergyman who packed up his meager possessions and came North with his Southern congregation, and there is the skilled pulpit provocateur, the "hell fire" preacher who poisons his newly-arrived Southern congregation with anti-CIO, anti-Roosevelt, anti-Allied sermons. In the main, these poor clergymen and their followers are potentially union material. But at the moment there is a race on between the unions and reactionary industrialists to win them.

To date roughly half a million Southern whites have come to Detroit. Thousands more arrive each month seeking work and the promise of wages they had no hope of ever getting in the feudal economy of the South.

And with this half a million have come about 3,500 southern clergymen. Detroit, as a consequence, has become the pivotal center of a great "Bible Belt" comprising, in the main, Fundamentalist Baptists—the "hell fire" preachers who are not under a disciplined denominational control, and many of whom pander to the backward racial prejudices of the uneducated southern whites who attend their churches.

PULPIT PROVOCATEUR

A packed congregation, with typical southern Holy Roller fervor, sits facing a tall, gaunt preacher. More than 3,000 churchgoers are at the service. The preacher, a sly, calculating gleam in his eyes, is mopping his brow. He is in the middle of a harangue.

Suddenly a hysterical voice from the congregation shouts:

"What are we fightin' Britain's war for?"

Another takes up the cry:

"Who got us into this evil war?"

The preacher holds up his hands in supplication.

"Peace to you, brothers!" he intones.

No disagreement or admonition comes from him at all.

The preacher is the Rev. Frank Norris, one of the most powerful clerical figures in Detroit and the entire midwest. He is an anti-Semite. He is industry-backed. He is, and has been for years, a vicious force among Detroit's half-million newcomer southern whites against the CIO—and especially the United Auto Workers Union.

And now his industrial backers pin great hopes on him as a potential destructive force against the Roosevelt Administration in the forthcoming 1944 election campaign.

city of Detroit set aside the park laws, allowing Norris to hold open air revival meetings, drawing crowds at times of 40,000 people.

GENERAL MOTORS' TOUCH

During the great CIO organizing drive throughout Detroit and Michigan back in 1935-36, a committee of business men, said to be headed by now deceased Philip Eitelmeier, a General Motors tycoon, financed Norris to follow in the wake of CIO organizers in key cities all over the state. When a CIO organizer held a mass meeting and made some progress, say in Flint, Norris would get a big press and billboard build-up several days later and then appear on the platform to castigate the "red" CIO. History records the fact, fortunately, that he lost out on his barnstorming tour.

Liberal-minded preachers in Detroit charge that Norris got the land for his church through a donation from General Motors. Meanwhile, another liberal, pro-labor preacher made the charge that a group of his congregation were approached to join the Klan and that Norris' name was used as a come-on.

Other Pulpit Provocateurs doing inestimable damage in Detroit and the Midwest are the notorious "Reverend" G. L. K. Smith, Charles E. Coughlin and the "Cowboy Evangelist," Rev. Harry Springer. Big auto companies, notably Packard, Chrysler and Hudson, have begun allowing the Norris type of Fundamentalistic preachers to hold noon services in the plants. The union, while cooperating, is keeping a wary eye on the tone of the sermons—for good reason.

MAY BOOMERANG

If these southern white clergy-men are being consciously used by some of the auto executives with an eye to a postwar knock-down battle against the unions, they may find that the plan has boomerang tendencies. The same trick has been tried in other industries in the past, and while it may succeed for the moment, it eventually fails. The steel industry tried it by importing thousands of southern Negro and white strikebreakers during the historic 1919 strike. The bulk eventually became good union men. The Chicago meat packers tried it and today some of the leaders of the Packinghouse Workers come from the ranks of those imported workers. The UAW, like most trade unions, is learning that organization is not confined to the department, the plant or the company. Unionization is a community problem—and it is a safe bet that hundreds of these poor southern clergymen will learn that there are more Christian aims in unionism than in company largess.

INDUSTRIALIST BACKING

The bulk of these 3,500 Fundamentalist preachers is dependent upon Detroit's industrialists for help. Many work in the auto plants and preach nights and Sundays. Their establishments range from store fronts to ornate structures, according to their "in" with the industrialists, and union men fear that unless both the "hell fire" working preachers and their southern white followers are won over to organized labor's side, reaction-ary employers may try to use the anti-union preachers against labor in the immediate postwar period. Investigators of the disastrous anti-Negro riots here last summer have reason to believe that one of the causes of the riots was the continual racist harangue from some of these Fundamentalist Baptist pulpits prior to the outbreaks. That some industrialists are carefully grooming these backward clerical elements was seen recently in the arrival of a southern preacher who literally came to town in overalls with not a penny to his name. In a few weeks, he had a congregation of nine members in a little store front church. A few months later he mysteriously acquired a \$35,000 church property and began anti-CIO, anti-Negro sermonizing in a big way.

SENSE THE DANGER

The trade unions, fortunately, are aware of the inherent danger in this clerical setup and are trying, with some success, to win both the congregations and the preachers over. Biggest and potentially most dangerous of the preachers is one Rev. Frank Norris, who threatens to become another Coughlin. Norris has built his church, the Temple Baptist, at 14 and Marguerite Ave. here into "big business" and makes no denial to the charge that he was brought to Detroit by the powerful Joy family of Packard Motor for the purpose of lighting the CIO, particularly the UAW. And while Henry Ford has recently called off his dogs and agreed to work harmoniously with the UAW, it was Ford who financed a round-the-world trip for Norris shortly after he arrived from North Worth, Texas.

Norris' church is a huge affair, emblazoned with neon lights which often announce sermons along the lines of "Are the Jews Our Brothers?" He is a past master at the Billy Sunday style of pulpit oratory and his sermons are invariably anti-Soviet and anti-Roosevelt. So great is his influence becoming that the