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# The Prism

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## In memory of Bob Sheldon

"Bob had that spirit of bringing light to his community"

There are some people whose allegiance is to the human race and to the survival of the earth. They oppose the pursuit of empire, whatever its guise. They are called internationalists. Bob Sheldon, founder of the Internationalist Bookstore, was one of them.

He was mortally wounded on the night of February 21. On the way to the hospital that night, I happened to hear a tape of a talk commemorating another internationalist, Ben Linder, the American volunteer who was murdered by the US-backed contras for the crime of bringing electricity to light a tiny village in Nicaragua.

Whatever the motive for last month's murder, Bob had that spirit of bringing light to his community. *The Prism* staff will fondly remember the guidance and support Bob gave us from the beginning.

*Those who want to volunteer their help in keeping the Internationalist Bookstore open, please contact:*

Internationalist Bookstore Committee  
P.O. Box 951  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514  
Checks should be made payable to: "IBC"



COURTESY MARILYN CHEZZI

1992, January

## Hamlet: Never again!

Since the September 3 Hamlet fire, every week has brought new revelations of official disregard for human life at every level. The plant was never inspected, but a tiny ice cream facility next door was—several times! An FDA inspector was in the plant every day inspecting chicken but overlooking safety hazards. He actually approved locking exit doors "to keep flies out." And while there had only been three reported cases of theft at the plant, a businessman member of the state OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) advisory panel claimed that workers there "brought the fire on themselves!" Governor Martin says workers need to "speak up," but it's been revealed that federal OSHA does not respond to anonymous complaints. Local media call for regulation. But more important, workers need representation.

The following is a large portion of last month's guest editorial that was left out due to a layout error. We reprint it with our apologies to the author, Justice Speaks, the newspaper of the Black Workers for Justice.

The Hamlet tragedy has revealed more to the world than merely the callousness, greed, and inhumanity of one profit hungry corporate family. It reveals more than the lack of adequate regulations or their enforcement at the local, state, and federal level.

Such a needless industrial tragedy could only happen to a Southern working class shackled by the crisis that is their day to day experience.

At Imperial workers were paid poverty level wages. Low wages are characteristic of the South.

Imperial workers were permitted one bathroom break per day. The lack of dignity and respect on the job is a common characteristic of the South.

Imperial workers paid tremendously high (for poverty wages) insurance costs each month. Many Southern companies force Southern workers to pay for their own coverage for inadequate insurance, if coverage is offered at all.

Former Imperial workers complain that a common occurrence at the plant was to fire an

injured worker after they received workmen's compensation for an injury on the job. Southern states have the worst injury compensation programs in the country, with North Carolina leading the list, where punishment by firing is the most common "remedy" for on-the-job accidents.

Imperial's maintenance workers were forced to "leave the burners on" while they attempted to repair faulty hydraulic lines "to save down time." Forced production, regardless of the cost to the workforce, is the rule of the day in Southern plants. In the poultry industry, injuries like carpal tunnel syndrome may have reached epidemic proportions.

Imperial Foods located itself in a poor Southern African-American community. More than a third of all industries in the South will "find their way" to a Black Belt area—especially those industries which are labor intensive.

The town of Hamlet is 44 percent African-American while Richmond County is 35 percent Black. Yet, political organization and Black representation are non-existent with the exception of the Town of Dobbin Heights. The lack of Black political power in the South is a major factor in the lack of political and regulatory protections for African-American people throughout the South.

Imperial Foods workers had no union! The South has the lowest percentage of organized workers in the country. Even where unions do exist in the South, they are weakened by the lack of a supportive climate.

Twenty-five Southern workers are dead. We mourn with their families and loved ones. We share their frustration, anger, despair, and pain. To paraphrase one worker, "They cared more about their chickens and profits than they did about the people who worked there." Imperial Foods' locked doors and blocked exits tell it all. However, it was never more true that we must do more than feel the pain and suffering of all that we have lost. The Hamlet tragedy must never happen again!

Contributions can still be sent to: Imperial Food Products Victim Relief Fund, P.O. Box 151, Hamlet, NC 28345. The Relief Fund is being administered by the town of Dobbin Heights.