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 empires, 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 motives 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"

1992, January

Hamlet: Never again!

Since the September 3 Handa fire, every week has brought new revelations of official indifference to human life at every level. The place was inadequately stocked,44,000 families were dependent on the facility for firewood, and a fire-breathing, moronic press was designed to keep fires out. And while there had only been two reported cases of theft in the plant, a business manager of the Cisco OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) advisory panel claimed that workers there 'laughed the fire on themselves.' Governor Martin was workers need to 'speak up' and it's been revealed that the OSHA did 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 corporation. 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 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 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. Southern companies force 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 workers’ compensation for an injury on the job. Southern states have the most injury compensation programs in the country, with North Carolina leading the list, where punishment for filing is the most common “remedy” for on-the-job accidents.

Imperial’s maintenance workers were forced to “leave the plant” while they attempted to repair faulty hydraulic lines “in some down time.” Forced production, regardless of the cost to the workforce, is the name of the game in Southern plants. The poultry industry, injuries like capsulitis and amputations 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” in a Black belt area—especially those industries which are labor intensive.

The town of Hamlet is 44 percent African-American while Richmond County is 55 percent Black. Yet political organization and black empowerment are non-existent with the exception of the Town of Robbins 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 nowhere to turn. The South has the lowest percentage of organized workers in the country. Even when unions try to exist in the South, they are weakened by the lack of a supportive climate.

Twenty-two Southern workers are dead. We mourn with their families and loved ones. We grieve their frustration, anger, despair, and pain. To paraphrase one worker, “They cared more about their chickens than they did about the people who worked there.” Imperial Foods dowsed down toxic smoke and called them back in all. However, it was 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 Foods Products Victim Relief Fund, P.O. Box 151, Hamlet, NC 28345. The Relief Fund is being administered by the town of Robbins Heights.