

Payton, Boyd Ellsworth ^[1]

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by Robin Brabham, 1994

21 Apr. 1908–1 Sept. 1984

See also: [Harriet-Henderson Cotton Mills Strike](#) ^[2].

Boyd Ellsworth Payton, labor organizer and executive, was born in Dobbin, W.Va., the son of James William, a timber contractor, and Mary Sidonna King Payton. As a youth growing up in Garrett County, Md., where the family had moved when he was two, Payton had aspired to be a minister; but, following graduation from Oakdale High School in 1926, he began working in the Chemical Division of the Celanese Corporation of America plant in Cumberland, Md. During his seventeen-year career with the company, he established the Celanese Benefit Club to assist employees in financial need and helped organize Celanese Local No. 1874 of the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) in 1936. As president of the 11,000-member local in 1941, he supported the company's hiring of black workers to compensate for the wartime labor shortage; but he lost the next election because of this support. Nevertheless, he was elected president of the Maryland and District of Columbia Congress of Industrial Organizations Council in 1942.

The next year the TWUA named Payton an international representative and assigned him to Lynchburg, Va., as regional director for Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland. He served as president of the Virginia State CIO Council (1944–47) and as an international vice-president of the TWUA (1948–64). In 1953 the TWUA promoted him to director of the eleven-state southern region with headquarters in [Charlotte](#) ^[3]. During a strike of city bus workers in 1957, Payton, appointed by the mayor to be his labor adviser, succeeded in persuading both parties to accept a compromise settlement.

In November 1958 Payton went to [Henderson](#) ^[4] to assist in negotiations between TWUA Locals No. 578 and 584 and the management of the Harriet-Henderson Mills. The situation had become polarized as the company demanded substantial revisions to the existing contract, parts of which had been in effect since 1943. After the entire work force struck, the company used strikebreakers to reopen the mills in February 1959. In the following month, there were reports of sixteen bombings; more than 150 arrests were made, and Payton himself was assaulted. Governor [Luther Hodges](#) ^[5] unsuccessfully tried to mediate the dispute, which he later described as "a blot" on the state "in which just about everyone was at fault." Union members increasingly felt that the textile industry was using the situation to subvert all unions, and they particularly resented the role of the state, through the Highway Patrol and the [National Guard](#) ^[6], in protecting the strikebreakers.

On 15 June Payton, two other union officials, and five union members were indicted for conspiracy to dynamite a [Carolina Power and Light Company](#) ^[7] substation and to destroy two mill buildings. The sole evidence against Payton was a telephone call he took for his assistant in which he warned the caller, as he did everyone, that the phone was probably bugged. The caller, Harold Aaron, admitted in court that he was a paid informant for the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI), but his testimony as chief prosecution witness convinced the jury that all eight defendants were guilty.

In his book on the case, *Scapgoat: Prejudice/Politics/Prison* ^[8], Payton described a conversation he had with Aaron in 1966 in which Aaron admitted to having been coached by the SBI to give false testimony against Payton. According to Payton, Aaron agreed to meet him in Washington, D.C., the following day and tell his story to a reporter. The next and final news Payton had of him, however, was of his confinement to the psychiatric ward of the Veterans Hospital in [Durham](#) ^[9].

As a result of Aaron's courtroom testimony, Payton was sentenced to a six- to ten-year prison term. After exhausting all avenues for appeal, he and the others went to prison in November 1960. Shortly thereafter Payton failed a lie detector test, but such people as evangelist Billy Graham, author Harry Golden, and Burlington Mills president [Spencer Love](#) ^[10] continued to assert his innocence to the new governor, [Terry Sanford](#) ^[11]. In July 1961 Sanford reduced the sentences of the men, and Payton was released in August after having served nine months. Sanford eventually pardoned Payton—but not the others—on his last day in office, 31 Dec. 1964.

Upon his release, the Textile Workers Union made Payton an assistant to the national organizing director and later director of the Upper South Region. In the years before his pardon, Payton found his effectiveness as an organizer greatly diminished; consequently, he resigned in 1964 and took a job conducting tours for foreign trade unionists under the sponsorship of the U.S. Departments of Labor and State. Within a month, Congressman William M. Tuck of Virginia succeeded in having Payton fired when he protested the use of an "ex-con" in such a position. After Payton received his pardon, the Labor Department hired him, and he served in various administrative posts in the Neighborhood Youth Corps and the Manpower Administration before retiring in 1977.

Payton married Katherine (Kitty) Jardine Harvey (1908–73) in 1932, and they had three daughters: Patricia, Sandra, and

Nancy. An active member of the Presbyterian church, he taught Sunday school and served as an elder of Forest Hills Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. He died in Charlotte and was buried in Sharon Memorial Park.

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