

Frederick Douglas: Militant Fighter for Negro Freedom

Born in Slavery in Lynch District of Maryland

By CYRIL BRIGGS

FEBRUARY 12, anniversary of the births of both Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln, is customarily devoted by the ruling class and its agents in the ranks of the Negro people to an annual ballyhoo around the myth that emancipation was handed the Negro people on a silver platter, without any struggle on their part.

In their "Lincoln Day" orations, the bourgeois politicians consistently ignore the leading role played by Douglas in the Civil War and pre-Civil War days. The Negro reformist leaders, on their part, pay only an incidental tribute to the fearless Negro abolitionist and agitator, by way of hypocritical lip service to the cause of Negro freedom to which he devoted his life. This is not accidental. Douglas' whole life is a flaming refutation of the servile program of Negro reformism against militant struggle and for abject submission to the white ruling class oppressors.

Frederick Douglas was born in slavery on Feb. 12, 1817, in Tuckahoe on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, a district notorious even today for its bestial oppression and hideous lynch murders of Negroes. Douglas escaped to the North, after several unsuccessful attempts. His experience with the slave system taught him that "men are whipped oftener who are whipped easiest." In his autobiography, he relates how those slaves who defended themselves would be brutally beaten for the time, but would never again be whipped: "Experience proves that those are most abused who can be abused with the greatest impunity. Men are whipped oftener who are whipped easiest."

Fiercely Non-Compromising

Douglas waged relentless battle against "the hell-black crime of slavery." Fiercely he denounced Lincoln's attempt to effect a compromise with the slave-holders at



the expense of Negro freedom. Bitterly he condemned Lincoln's early refusal to recruit the Negro slaves and the free Negroes into the armed forces of the Federal Government.

During his life-time, Douglas saw the crushing of the slave power, the development of armed struggles by the Negro ex-slaves for possession of the land and for political freedom, and the rise of the ex-slaves to political power in the "Black Belt" as the active allies of the northern industrial bourgeoisie. He also saw their subsequent shameful betrayal at the hands of that same bourgeoisie, and the triumph of the action.

Like other abolitionists Douglas at first harbored illusions in the unselfish and humanitarian motives of the northern industrialists. He failed to realize that the chief aim of the northern industrialists in the Civil War was to crush a rival system and establish their hegemony over the whole country. He, however, had no illusion that Lincoln's belated Emancipation Proclamation and call of the Negroes to arms was dictated by humanitarian motives:

"Liberty came to the freedmen of the United States, not in mercy, but in wrath, not by moral choice, but by military necessity," Douglas declared in a speech on August 1, 1880, at Elmira, N. Y.

Nor had he any illusions that

Spurred on Struggle of Slaves Towards Emancipation

emancipation was handed the slaves from above without struggle on their part.

Understood Necessity of Struggle

In his Elmira speech, Douglas gave the following estimate of the gains won by the Negro masses in the "Black Belt" as a result of their militant struggle as active, aggressive allies of the bourgeois revolution:

"Out of this tempest... came the abolition of slavery, came the employment of colored troops, came colored citizens, came colored jurymen, came colored congressmen, came colored schools in the South, and the great amendments of our national constitution."

Castigates Betrayers

Douglas was thus no advocate of peaceful submission to the violence of the oppressor. Nor was he servile henchman of the Republican party as pictured by present-day Negro henchmen of that party. In his Elmira speech he sharply castigated the northern bourgeoisie and the then ruling Republican Party for their betrayal of the promise of land to the ex-slaves:

"They were sent away empty-handed, without money, without friends, and without a foot of land to stand on. Old and young, sick and well, were turned loose to the naked sky, naked to their enemies."

The only fitting tribute to the memory of Frederick Douglas is such a campaign as planned by the League of Struggle for Negro Rights around Lincoln-Douglas Day. That campaign envisages an intensification on Lincoln-Douglas Day, Feb. 12, of the whole struggle against jim-crow oppression and lynching, self-determination for the "Black Belt" with full equality for Negroes throughout the country; freedom for the Scottsboro boys and Angelo Herndon, and passage of the Bill of Civil Rights and For Suppression of Lynching, drawn up by the L. S. N. R.