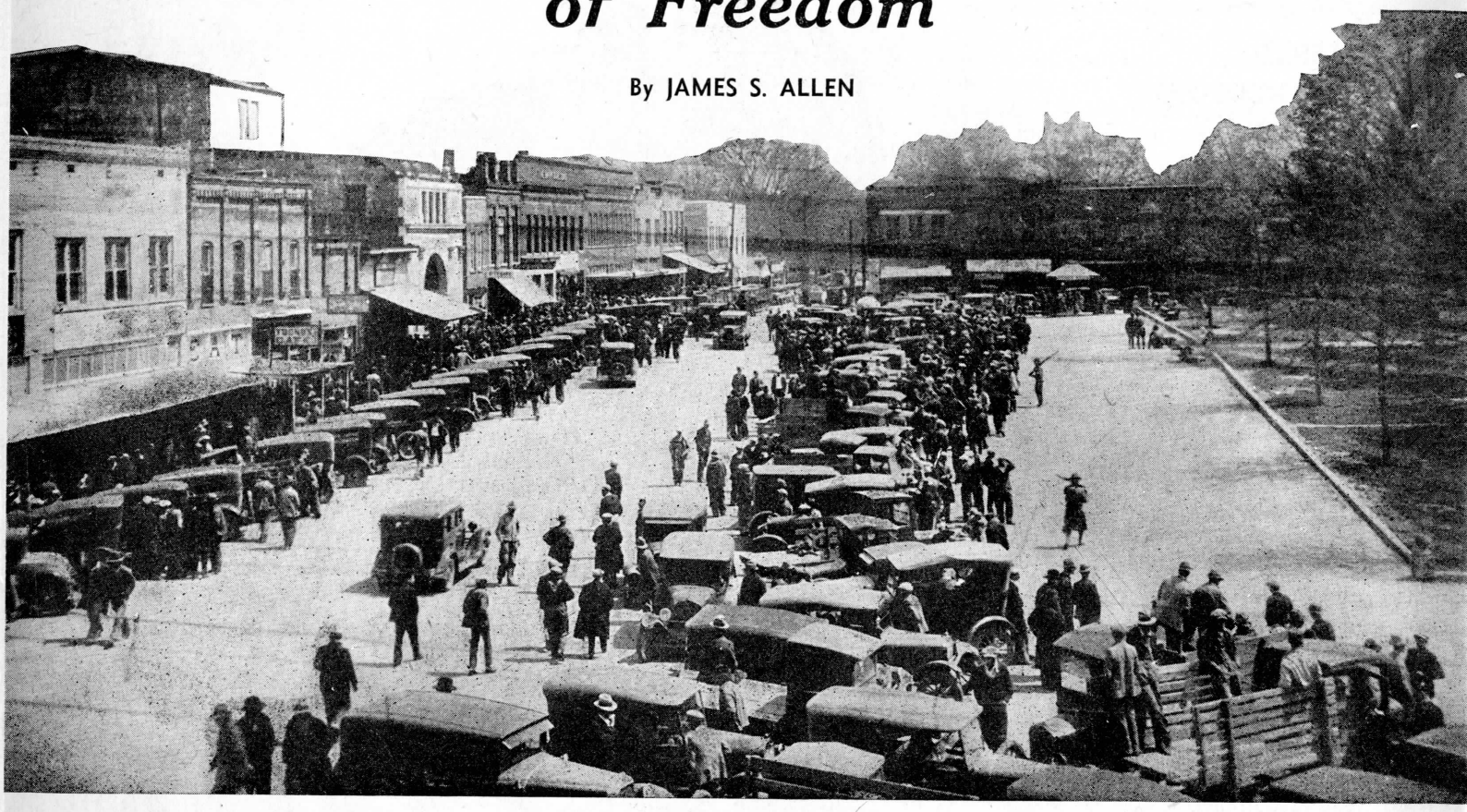
SCOTTSBORO — *A Proclamation of Freedom*

By JAMES S. ALLEN



Scottsboro, Alabama, during the first trials of the nine Scottsboro boys, April, 1931. The picture was taken right in front of the court house.

A gifted writer should tell the story of the families of the Scottsboro boys. For in the lives of these families there is contained the profound meaning of the Scottsboro Case — the conditions which produced Scottsboro as well as the transformation which the case wrought in the life and outlook of tens of thousands of families. I do not intend, nor am I able, to tell that story. I can only indicate the outline of such a story for I knew some of the families of the Scottsboro boys from the time their names were known only to their neighbors and friends.

On the day the boys were arrested at Paint Rock, Alabama, I had just returned to Chattanooga from a visit to a family of Negro share-croppers near Sumter, South Carolina. This family lived on a huge plantation on which about 200 families were virtually enslaved. The father, no more than fifty, was already a broken, old man. The mother could barely move around the two-room wooden shack. Grandchildren of eight and ten years old were already working on the fields. An older son, who had traveled with me, had come to help father make the crop. I was hidden in this shack during the day, for strange white men in a Negro share-croppers hut are, to say the least, highly uncommon. Near the shack on the old Savannah Highway a chain gang was at work, maintained with state funds by the plantation master as his own private penal institution. This is a prison domain, a slave land. Sumter is only one spot in a huge plantation country where slavery, not in a form as refined as wage-slavery, prevails. I returned to Chattanooga with a sharp consciousness of modern plantation slavery, for the first time fully impressed upon me.

And I found an equally sharp expression of the social accompaniment of the plantation. The shrieking headlines in the afternoon papers announcing the arrest of nine young Negro boys on the charge of rape evoked fears of a wholesale lynching. Lowell Wakefield, who had just arrived as the Southern I.L.D. organizer, and Helen Marcy, my co-worker on the *Southern Worker,* immediately departed for Scottsboro, Alabama, to be present at the preliminary hearing. From there the first reports were wired to the *Daily Worker* and the I.L.D. in New York. A few days later we located the families of the boys living in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Hopeless, defeated, bewildered and resigned were the families of the boys. From their own life experiences they knew what a Negro was to expect in the South, but it was all inexplicable to them, without explanation and therefore without solution. When we explained our mission one of the mothers could only repeat through tears: "You are angels come from heaven!"

But the world-wide struggle for the lives of the boys has transformed these families. I knew them also in the early stages of the campaign, when they themselves were going through a poignant inner struggle against distrust of us and against the philosophy of submission preached by the dominant leadership of the race. Larger and larger sections of the Negro masses were then also beginning to go through a similar struggle, waged on a social and political plane. Among the parents and immediate families, in some to a greater and more thorough-going degree, confidence and hope began to take the place of resignation as the mass protest movement registered its first successes.

I never saw such large masses moved as profoundly as during those earlier

days of the Scottsboro Case, when basic issues of life projected themselves into every phase of the Negro community. It was as if a new proclamation of freedom had been broadcast, finding hearty and immediate response. All the issues raised by the case—the methods of struggle (shall it be mass defense or drawing-room dickering and submissive favor-seeking?), can we trust this new labor organization of the North? the white Communists, especially of the South? shall we enter upon a struggle —which is bound to be exceedingly sharp—for our rights as well as for the lives of the boys?—all these and related issues were heatedly argued in the churches, on the front porches of an evening, at the fish-fries, in the lodges, in the poolrooms, everywhere Negroes gathered.

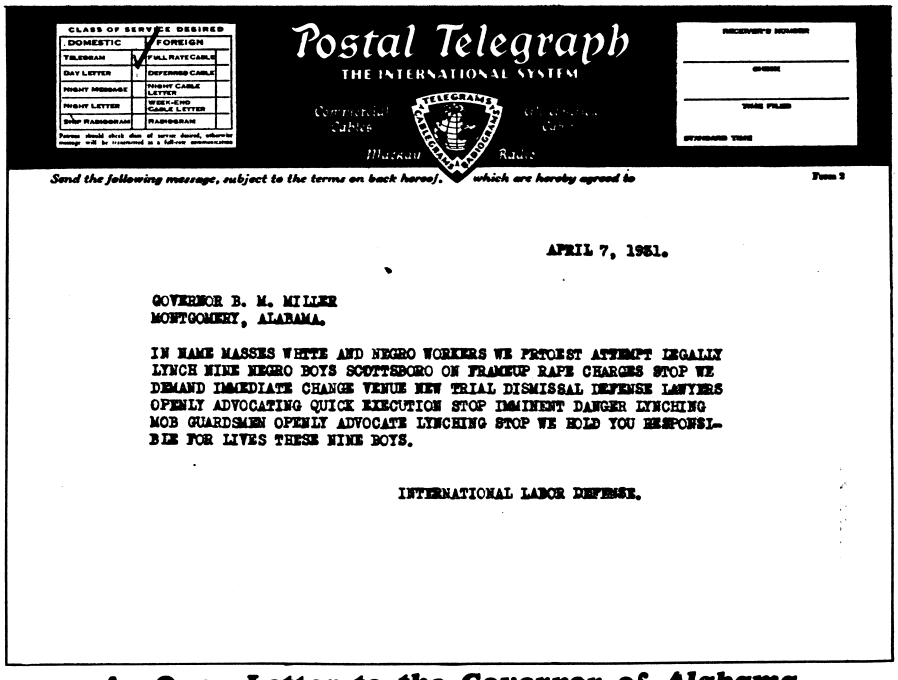
The decisive answers, of course, were given not in these conversations but in the mass defense actions. These played the important role in swinging large sections of the Negro masses to the left. These also bound the families of the boys and the boys themselves irrevocably to the working-class path of struggle, despite vacillations and hesitations which reflected the waverings of the masses themselves. If the enthusiasm of the families and of the masses was so spontaneous and responsive to the campaign organized and led by the I.L.D. it was because everyone felt that basic issues, at last, were being met, that the I.L.D. was answering the challenge squarely, that it had joined issue at the point with the plantation-capitalist South. In the fullest sense, basically, intimately, in such a way that the masses themselves recognized it and welcomed it, the Scottsboro Case had become the generating center of the struggle for Negro liberation. This is the strength of the Scottsboro Case, a strength which has been able to withstand the frontal attack of the white ruling class, the backbiting and sniping of the bourgeois Negro leaders, the traitors, and the spiritual leaders of anti-Communism among the Negroes.

The Scottsboro Case has thus far been a victory for the forces represented by the I.L.D. not only in the sense that the boys were three times saved from the electric chair and that the U. S. Supreme Court was forced to base its last reversal upon the issue of the right of Negroes to sit on juries. I think it has been a victory even wider and more significant. In addition to the symbolic, rallying, inspiring nature of the Scottsboro Case we must also recognize that for the first time since the Civil War has there occurred such a country-wide and international movement in defense of Negroes and for Negro rights. Scottsboro has with every turn in the case, with every new development, revealed new channels towards the Negro masses and *the white workers,* has shown endless capacity for unfolding new fields of struggle, for widening the field of struggle, for involving broader masses of people on issues of deep concern to them. With the Scottsboro Case in mind, we can fully appreciate the profundity of Lenin's observation that in the case of an oppressed people one single act of special brutality on the part of the oppressors may prove the spark for national rebellion.

Of as great significance—if not greater—is the fact that the I.L.D. and those who have supported its campaign (if I may be permitted poetic license) redeemed at long last American labor from decades of prejudice and criminal negligence with regard to the Negro. I do not mean to say that this prejudice and negligence have been, overcome. But the Scottsboro movement does mark a decisive turn towards incorporating the demands of the Negro liberation struggle in the program of American labor and thereby overcoming distrust among the Negro masses which has been accumulated over centuries of oppression and capitalized by segregationists and separatists. In the long run, this element of the Scottsboro Case is probably the most important from the point of view of overcoming chauvinist ideology among the white workers and reformist and nationalist influence among the Negroes. It is the most important initial step towards cementing solidarity of the basic masses of the white and Negro population.

The compass of the Scottsboro Case is as wide as the struggle for Negro liberation itself. It has within itself all the power necessary to rouse the potential, although still latent, forces necessary in that struggle. Much depends upon us—how well we can continue the struggle, meet each fresh attack of the ruling class with even greater counter-advances of the mass defense movement.

Copy of the first protest telegram sent by the I. L. D. to the governor of Alabama. Millions followed and must follow until the boys are freed.



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Send the following message, subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to

APRIL 7, 1931.

GOVERNOR B. M. MILLER
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA.

IN NAME MASSES WHITE AND NEGRO WORKERS WE PROTEST ATTEMPT LEGALLY LYNCH NINE NEGRO BOYS SCOTTSBORO ON FRAMEUP RAPE CHARGES STOP WE DEMAND IMMEDIATE CHANGE VENUE NEW TRIAL DISMISSAL DEFENSE LAWYERS OPENLY ADVOCATING QUICK EXECUTION STOP IMMINENT DANGER LYNCHING MOB GUARDSMEN OPENLY ADVOCATE LYNCHING STOP WE HOLD YOU RESPONSIBLE FOR LIVES THESE NINE BOYS.

INTERNATIONAL LABOR DEFENSE.

An Open Letter to the Governor of Alabama

Over a hundred intellectuals, churchmen, educators and other persons outstanding in public life throughout the country have signed an Open Letter just sent to Governor Bibb Graves of Alabama through the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. Among these are Senators Nye and Capper, Representative Amlie, Bishop McConnell of New York, Bishop Parsons of California, John Dewey, Broadus Mitchell, Erskine Caldwell, Oswald Garrison Villard, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, E. Haldeman-Julius, Martha Gruening, Anna M. Pennypacker, John Dos Passos, Lincoln Steffens, Sherwood Anderson.

The letter emphasizes Judge Horton's decision which declared the innocence of the Scottsboro boys, protests against the "numerous violations of basic principles of justice and human rights," and calls on Gov. Graves "to prevent reindictments and to assure the safe release of these nine boys" and "to enforce all the democratic rights guaranteed to Negroes as to all people by the Constitution."