

# Angelo Herndon -- a Leader of the Unemployed

## TELLS HIS OWN STORY

I was born in 1913, in Wyoming, Ohio, a suburb of Cincinnati. My father, who was a coal miner, died of pneumonia when I was very small. My mother struggled with the aid of some relatives, to give me a college education. I was always waiting eagerly for the time to come when I could go out to work, for the family was very large, consisting of eight people.

When I was twelve years old, my brother Leo and I quit school, although mother tried to force us to continue. When I was 13, we left home. Our first stopping place was Lexington, Ky. With the help of some older people, we were able to get work in the coal mines. We started out as coal loaders, getting 42 cents per ton, although the older miners got more. After we had worked for about nine months, our wages were cut from 42 cents a ton to 31 cents. We got disgusted and quit work.

We had some relatives in Birmingham, so that was our next destination.

I went to an employment bureau, and paid \$3.00 for a job. After two or three days, I was told that a job had been found for me, out of town. I was to get \$3.50 a day as a laborer in helping to construct the Goodyear Tire Company building in Gadsden, Ala. I gladly accepted the offer.

Upon my arrival, I found that wages were only \$1.75 per day. A group of us started back. But after a long discussion we decided to stay on. We were to stay in a company tent colony and pay 75 cents per night.

The first day, I operated a concrete mixer. After the day's work was done, the boss came around and told us that if we would work that night, we would get \$3. We agreed to do it. That night my job was setting steel and pouring concrete.

The next day, we were given till 12 o'clock to sleep. Then we returned to work. We continued doing this till Saturday. When the time came for us

to get our pay, we noticed a squad of policemen and guards at the pay office. As we formed in line and marched to the pay window, all of us who came from Birmingham were told to get out of line, as we didn't have anything coming to us. Everything had been taken for transportation, food and sleeping quarters. We were completely stranded. That night we hiked back to Birmingham.

After a few more jobs in mines I began to look for any kind of work I could find. One day a friend and I, in search of work, happened to come across some handbills stuck to a post. We snatched one off.

Later, after looking all over town without finding work, we set out for home. I took the handbill out of my pocket. I saw the startling headline: "Would you rather fight—or starve?" I called my friend. We both sat down and began to read that handbill. Near the bottom, we saw the announcement of a meeting called for 3 o'clock in the heart of the town, by the Unemployed Council. It was almost 3 then, and I said to my friend that we had better hurry to be there when the "fight" started. All the way I said to myself: "It's war. It's war. So I might as well get in it now as any other time."

We got there just a few minutes before the meeting started. A white worker began to speak, saying "Fellow-workers." He went on to tell us how the Negro workers were being treated, and how the unemployed white and Negro workers must stick together to better their conditions.

I knew very little of what this man was talking about. The next speaker was a Negro worker. He spoke along the same lines as the white worker.

Below: Workers' homes in the heart of Atlanta, Ga. Herndon led the workers' fight against such miserable conditions.

Right: This unemployed Negro worker sitting at Lincoln's feet realizes as Herndon did, "We'll have to fight to get our rights."

After the meeting, the speakers appealed for membership. I went right up and gave my name.

The next meeting was held in Capitol Park, a Jim-Crow park. About 500 Negro and white workers were present. The same two speakers were there that I had heard at my first meeting. From the park, we marched to the Community Chest, where 100 cops greeted us. When I saw this, I was a little shaky. They stood at the door and let only about twenty Negroes in. I happened to be included in this number. After we were seated, one of the white officers from the Community Chest began to speak. He said that, as far as the Negroes were concerned, the solution to their unemployment was to go back to the farm.

The I.L.D. Defends Workers Rights.



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gate to the National Unemployment Convention to be held in Chicago in July. About a day or two before the delegates left, the Kluxers began to raise a cry about social equality. They distributed red hand-bills throughout the city. One was placed at my door. The bills read: "Drive the Communists back to Russia and the North, Alabama is a good place for good Negroes but a bad place for bad Negroes."

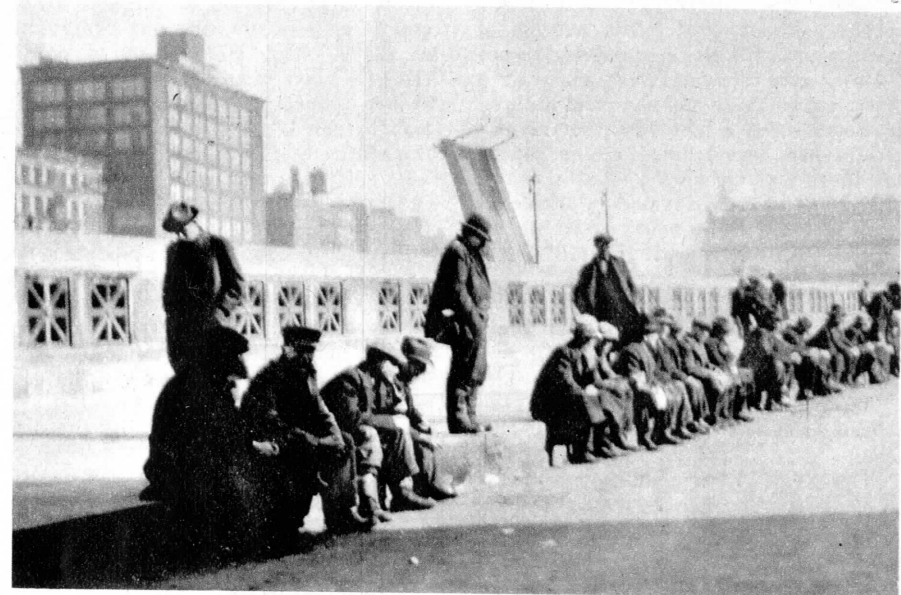
The day after I arrived in Chicago, I was treated to the sight of a demonstration in Union Park. After the city had given the workers the right to use the park, this right was withdrawn at the last minute.

Nevertheless, the demonstration was held. When a worker attempted to speak, police clubs began to fly right and left. Workers resisted the attacks of the police sluggers. A number of workers went to jail and others went to the hospital. About an equal number of sluggers also went to the hospital. When, that night, I read the distorted accounts of the demonstration in the capitalist press, I began to see the truth of what the speakers had been telling me in Birmingham. In

The next speaker was a Negro, robber of the Elks and editor of the Birmingham Reporter. And that was when I began to see the true role of the so-called Negro leaders. He opened his speech by saying: "White brothers and black brothers, don't be fooled or misled by some foreigner from a thousand miles away, that you don't know anything about. The Negro has plenty of friends in the South. All he has to do when in need is to go to his Southern white friends. The white labor speaker has tried to get you to accept social equality, but we don't want social equality, nor do we need it."

When I left the meeting my blood was hot enough to cook.

In June, 1930, I was elected a dele-



Above: Herndon must not go to his death on a Georgia chain gang like this one. The I.L.D. calls on all workers to demand an end to chain gang torture. Below: Herndon led the fight of white and Negro unemployed workers like these. Unemployed workers rally to the support of your leader: Angelo Herndon.

fact, the demonstration alone was a better education than I could have gotten otherwise in fifty years.

When I returned to Birmingham, I came an organizer of the miners.

Conditions in the mines were worse than horrible. The company had gunmen patrolling the highways, watching the miners. We had just started talking to the miners when some of the gunmen came up, and we were bound for the jail. This was my first experience in jail.

We were charged with vagrancy. Bail was fixed at \$3,000 each. After we had been in jail about seven days, a group of gunmen came to take us to a little company town to be tried.

In a few minutes we were in the courtroom. Within another few minutes, we had been sentenced to twelve months hard labor on the chain gang, and to a fine of \$500. But we carried the case to the circuit court and were acquitted.

Before the battle of the share-croppers in Camp Hill, on July 16, 1931, I was sent into the Black Belt to do

work. I was in Camden County, home of the present governor of Alabama. It was a very difficult situation for me to work in, but I did what was possible. After being there a few days, I discovered that someone I had had confidence in, a preacher and teacher, had reported me to the authorities in Selma, Ala. A lynch-mob began to form rapidly. It was composed of landlords and country business men. I had to beat it.

I was then sent to New Orleans as representative of the Trade Union Unity League. There was a strike of 7,000 longshoremen. During the course of my work among the strikers, I was arrested and charged with violation of the federal injunction, with inciting to riot, with being a dangerous and suspicious person, with distributing circulars, without a permit, and other charges. I was held for four days, and then released.

(Continued May Day Labor Defender)

