

Georgia Officials Boast of Chain Gang Tortures Which Await Herndon

By SASHA SMALL

(Editor's Note: This is the third of a series of articles by Sasha Small, editor of the Labor Defender, written after a trip to Georgia and Tennessee. In this article she tells more about the horrors of the chain gangs and describes the eagerness of the lynch-rulers of Georgia to have Angelo Herndon once more within their grasp.)

ATLANTA, Ga.—One of the horrors of the Georgia chain gang system is the earnestness and sincerity with which those who run it believe in it. They say it's the most "humane" penal system in the country. They say it's the best form of "punishment;" unlike their hypocritical colleagues in charge of prisons in other parts of the coun-

try they don't pretend that they are trying to "reform" criminals.

The prison commissioners boast of the fact that they don't shut the prisoners up in "any old penitentiary building." They leave them out in the open air, in the sunshine, under God's sky. They regret the fact that the cages are slowly disappearing to be replaced by wooden or stone buildings. The cages are soo cool in the summer! And if you want to shut out the breeze, why, you just let the tarpaulins down on both sides, and not a breath of air can come in! And in the winter, that canvas covering is stout enough to keep them warm. Georgia winters seldom have weather that is much below freezing, anyway! Many an incipient case of tuberculosis has been prevented by

the healthful outdoor treatment of the chain gang.

Commissioner Starves His Croppers

Judge Johns, the most intelligent of the men on the commission, tried hard to convince me of the truth of his statements. He said:

"I assure you that those men in the convict camps (he doesn't like the term chain gang) are far better off than the niggers I work on my land. And I work a lot of them, as share-croppers and as day laborers. They get more to eat than I give my men. They work shorter hours, they have better places to sleep in and they get more rest. And that goes for most of the white share-croppers in this state, too."

All the prisoners gain weight on

the chain gang, he assured me. They get meat once a week, and sorghum sy:up every day—"Think of that," he added. "I know of at least three camps where they are going to have ham this week-end."

Torture in the Stocks

Punishment? Yes, there must be punishment on the chain gangs. The lash was abolished by law some years ago. Only the stocks remain, and the Prison Commission in its fine, large, airy office in the State Capitol building is assured of the fact that the wardens do not abuse the use of stocks by the fact that they send in a monthly punishment report. They let me look at dozens of these reports. They give the name of the prisoner, his sentence, the punishment meted out and the reason for the punishment.

Of course, they all say stocks for "one hour," according to the rules, and the reasons are invariably the same. "Laziness, sassy talk, fighting, trying to run away."

Stocks are very simple instruments of torture. They are square wooden frames with four holes in them—two for the wrists and two for the ankles, arranged so that arms and legs will be parallel to each other. When the prisoner is being fastened into the stocks, he sits on a board. As soon as he is well fastened, this board is pulled out from under him, and he hangs by his wrists and ankles about six inches from the ground, all the weight of his body pulling downward.

The rules state specifically that no prisoner is to be kept in the

stocks more than "one hour at any one time," but as I learned later, at the end of an hour they are taken out, water is splashed in their faces to bring them back to consciousness and they are put back for as many other hours as the "warden's discretion," the final law in the chain gang, permits.

As I read through report after report, all of which state the crime for which the prisoner is serving time, I was amazed at the number of times the word "murder" was marked next to the names of Negro prisoners. The ratio of Negro to white prisoners is in general three to one. Judge Johns, who sat beside me in the record room, hastened to

(Continued on Page 2)

Georgia Officials Boast of Tortures

(Continued from Page 1)

assure me that they only murder each other. That's why the judges, who understand them, are lenient and send them to the chain-gang for life instead of to the electric chair! "We have very little trouble between the whites and the blacks in our state. We keep them far enough apart."

I noticed one sentence of two years for stealing a cow. This was a white man in Crisp County. The Judge stopped on that one, too. "Now, that might strike you as a harsh sentence," he said, "but it isn't. Not in that county. There are men in that county whose business it is to raise cows and hogs for sale. It's their main business. Some of them have herds of 500 and 600. Stealing a cow in that county becomes a very serious offense because it is interfering with the main business of that county. And you know that interfering with the main business anywhere is a serious offense. Horse-stealing in Texas used to be punishable by hanging because that was the main business there."

Political Prisoners

On the question of political prisoners, the Commissioners got quite mellow. No, they had none such in their state. There are no foreigners in their state, so they have none of that labor trouble that so aggravates the north and fills its jails with reds and trouble-makers. They would soon have one such prisoner, however, a fellow by the name of Angelo Herndon, who was out on bond. They did not even try to hide their feeling on the question of Herndon being out on bond. They showed how outraged they were, how seriously this fact challenged their authority and their power.

Herndon, they informed me, was guilty of a very serious crime, attempting to set up a Black Republic, not only in Georgia but throughout the south—a very serious crime! But just to show how fair they are, they assured me that Herndon would be treated no differently from any other prisoner on the chain-gang. He would sleep, in the cages with them, toil on the road-gang from sun-up to sundown, if he used "sassy talk" he would be put in the stocks or in solitary confinement in one of the cages with no food or water, and if he tried to run away, he'd get the same treatment that all other run-way prisoners got.

Highway Commission Likes

Chain-Gang

The State Highway Commission has the same high opinion of the chain-gang system as the Prison Commissioners, a legislative investigation just completed notwithstanding. Two State Senators and two State Representatives investigated about six of the chain-gangs. Chairman W. E. Wilburn of the Highway Commission informed me, and took only the evidence of the prisoners themselves, not the evidence of the guards and the wardens. And on the word of a "bunch of convicts" they demanded the removal of two wardens from Heard and White Counties!

Chairman Wilburn "accepted their resignations" against his own better judgment. They knew their business, these two wardens. In the statement he released to the press the afternoon after I spoke to him, Chairman Wilburn suddenly disclosed the fact that six convicts had fled from the Heard County camp the day after the warden under fire left. "There are only a few convict wardens in the state who know how to handle the real tough prisoners. Smith was one of them. Of course when it comes out that they have had to be severe with some of their charges, it looks bad, but the truth about the matter is that the severe methods are generally needed or they are not used."

The fired wardens were accused by the investigation commission of "rapping convicts on the head with black-jacks." Incidentally, the only public statement this commission issued stated: "In making our inspection we have found that most of the camps in Georgia are in fairly good condition and that improvements have been made for the last several years."

Interracial Commission—Jim-Crow

Agency

Robert E. Eleazer, educational director of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, did not quite share the enthusiasm of the other commissioners for the chain-gang system, but he had no harsh words to say against them either. "They are not all that they should be," was all that this man, who prides himself on the work his commission has done since its inception in 1919 to promote "understanding between the races and to improve basic attitudes," had to say.

After listening to his glowing descriptions of the new Jim-Crow school buildings the Interracial Commission had succeeded in having erected, Jim-Crow bus lines that they forced the State of North Carolina to institute, and the fact that understanding had reached the point where in the latest lynching in North Carolina, Negroes participated along with the whites, we came to the question of Angelo Herndon and what the Interracial Commission was going to do to help win his freedom and to abolish the vicious slave law under which he was sentenced.

Interracial Commission Won't Help Herndon

His answer was preceded by a long indictment of the "sins" of the International Labor Defense, which, he assured me, was "nothing more than a small handful of Communists," although they should be given credit for the fact that in their handling of the Scottsboro case they forced the U. S. Supreme Court to hand down a ruling which will result in putting Negroes on the jury rolls of Alabama.

His answer on what his group would do for Angelo Herndon to prevent this young hero from going to his death on the chain-gang, to prevent others from suffering the same fate under the same law, was short and simple:

"If a youngster wants to commit suicide, we will not stop him from becoming a martyr."