

Chain Gang Like Death; Herndon Must Be Saved

(Editor's Note: This is the fifth and last of a series of articles on the Georgia chain gangs by Sasha Small, editor of the Labor Defender, official organ of the International Labor Defense. In this installment she describes a "model" convict camp, and makes a stirring call to the masses to save Angelo Herndon from the chain gang.)

By Sasha Small

ATLANTA, Ga.—Harris County has the "model" chain-gang of the State of Georgia.

They have no stocks here. Only chains. They sleep in cages, but the cages are painted silver on the outside. They have a stockade no more than ten yards square, in which 95 prisoners are penned in behind

high walls topped by barbed wire, but its sandy floor is swept clean.

I saw the men at work, under the broiling sun and the ever-vigilant eyes of armed guards, drenched in sweat in which the red soil dust was becoming encrusted. The chains between their legs impede their movements, but not enough to restrict their work. The youngest on the gang is thirteen years old—a slight, skinny black child. He got six years for breaking into a grocery store. The average age of the others seemed between 20 and 30.

Convicts Can't Eat Food

I saw them eat. One table for the white convicts in a corner, the rest for the Negroes. In the middle of each table there is a tin bucket filled with water. On its sides, in bright red paint, is the word "Colored." None of them finished the mess of food on their tin plates. Almost all of them threw the tiny scraps of their weekly portion of meat on the table.

I walked into the cages in which they sleep—glistening silver on the outside, black with years of grime and filth on the inside. Twelve bunks in each in three tiers. The bunk above comes about six inches above the face of the man who sleeps below. The bunks are covered with coarse blue woolen blankets over dilapidated mattresses. A second suit of stripes hangs near each bunk. It's washed all right, but you can't wash out years of red dust, or the frayed, ragged edges.

I spoke to several of the convicts, alone, with no guards listening to us. They all assumed me that this was really a good chain-gang—way better than most. The doctor was a nice man, too. Tried to help you out. The doctor took me to see one of the prisoners who was sick. He was locked in one of the cages. The heat that rushed out when the steel door was swung back was like a blow. The sick man lay in the middle lowest bunk on the left side of the cage. His powerful black shoulders were drenched in sweat. After the doctor had looked him over, the door was locked again, to

stay locked until Monday morning, when the doctor would come to take him off to the hospital.

Hushed Misery

The atmosphere on this model chain-gang is one of hushed misery. You feel the burden of the endless grind, day in, day out,—work, eat, work, sleep—work, eat, work, sleep—with the clinking of the chains, the gnawing of the rings that fasten them against flesh and bone, the endless tortured passing of time.

That's the best that the ruling class of Georgia can offer to Angelo Herndon. It is not likely that they will send them to this "model" chain-gang. It just happens that it is situated on the other side of the mountain which is covered by the private property of none other than President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Every word of protest from Angelo Herndon will be recorded as "sassy talk" in the prison punishment record with its fatal toll of hours in the stocks. Every refusal recorded as "laziness" which must be punished according to the warden's discretion! Any move may be recorded as "an attempt to escape," the only official reason for which the guards are "permitted to shoot."

Chain-Gang for Herndon Means Death

There can be no doubt that if Angelo Herndon goes back to Georgia he goes to certain death. The murderers' hands are itching for their prey. Their eyes are filled with a sadistic gleam of anticipation. They must not get him. They shall not!

Every signature on the two-million petition list to Governor Talmadge, now in circulation, is another barrier set up between the murderous Georgia chain-gang and our Angelo Herndon. Every demand upon the United States Supreme Court and upon Governor Talmadge of Georgia is another challenge to rule by murder and terror, is smashing another link in the chain that is waiting for Angelo Herndon. We must save him. He must stay free!