

A Negro, a Prisoner, in the South...

To be a prisoner is agony enough. . . . But to be a Negro, in the South, in chains for political reasons. . . . Read what Angelo Herndon told the recent Conference for Recognition of the Status of Political Prisoners.

By Angelo Herndon

There is a special side of the question of the status of political prisoners, and that is the treatment of political prisoners who are Negroes.

This question comes very much to the forefront, with the growing number of political prisoners in the South. I refer especially to Negroes arrested for political action or economic action. In addition to the already prevailing prejudices that exist against Negroes in the South, there is added in such a case even more prejudice and more hatred for a Negro arrested while fighting for better conditions.

There are 29 Negro political prisoners serving a year and more or held on capital charges in the country today. Most of these are in the South. I have had opportunity to know of the condition of some of these political prisoners, especially in the state of Alabama. To be a Negro and to be charged with a political offense is much more serious than to be white and to be charged with the same offense.

In the state of Georgia, that is during the time I was in prison in Fulton Tower, this was very evident to me. It is necessary not only to fight for special privileges for political prisoners; in some instances it is an absolute necessity that such a fight be put up to protect the lives of these prisoners.

After I had been in jail for some months they might have connived to take me out and string me up to a tree. They even threatened to do it. They would have put chains on me right in jail. But because of the sentiment on the other side, the vigilance of the toiling masses organized by the International Labor Defense, they decided finally that this was not the best thing to do.

Life Behind Bars

It is very difficult for many people to understand how life is for a prisoner who has been put behind the bars for his working class activity. It so happens that it is even difficult to explain just what this life is like.

We know that most of the jails in the South are very different from most of the jails in other

parts of the country. In the South most of the jails are old, rotten and dilapidated. People are huddled up together in there and, in Fulton Tower, for instance, there is no differentiation between prisoners, no matter what the charge against them.

Most of the time the place is so congested that people cannot move around in it. In the Fulton Tower where I spent 26 months there were never less than 1,000 prisoners at any time, and sometimes as high as 2,000. The capacity is 400. As a result of these conditions, prisoners are actually forced to sleep one on top of the other. Three prisoners slept in a bunk, supposed to hold two, and prisoners slept on the floor and under the bunks. And this is something which you must understand is dangerous. There are people there who are diseased. There are hardened criminals. To live under such conditions is enough to drive any person insane.

You Can't Read

In addition to this, for the political prisoner, there is the fact that he is not permitted to have any reading material, literature that deals with the fight, the struggle in which he himself was arrested. To be cut off from this is just like being cut off from life. As a matter of fact, often there is not much difference between such torture and death itself, because you know absolutely nothing of what is going on, you are not permitted to converse about the things in which you are interested, about any political, social or economic question, at all.

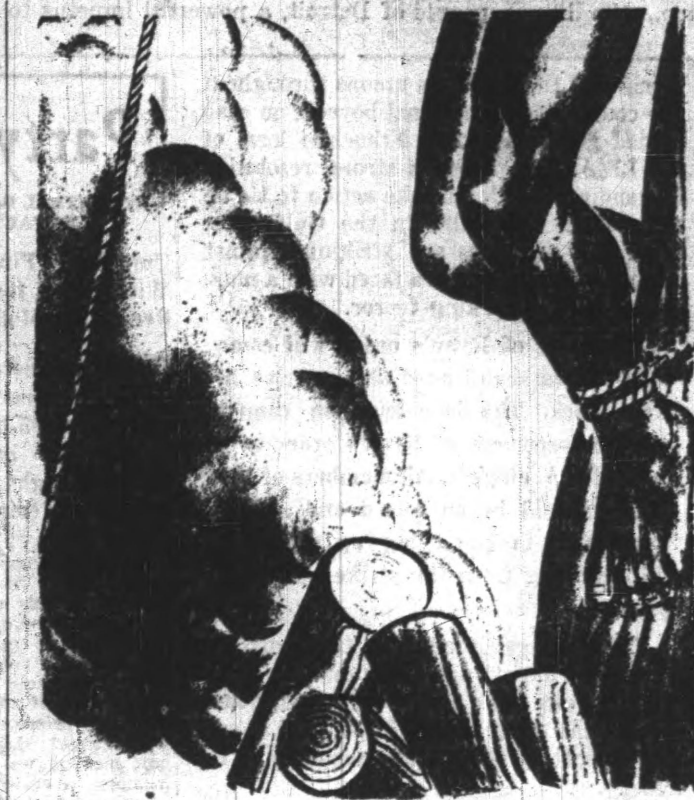
During the 26 months I was in Fulton Tower, I did not have a chance to get out of my little cell, about eight by twelve, except when my attorneys came to see me. All this time I was not permitted to get out of the cell for any exercise. Other prisoners, in some cases prisoners who had actually committed murders and other depraved crimes, were let out to walk in the lobby, and received other special privileges.

Of course, some of my persecution and torture was so barbarous because I was a Negro, and it aroused the prejudice of the officials, for a Negro to be arrested and tried for something that had nothing to do with the usual charges on which Negroes are framed.

"Leading Citizens" in Jail

As Mr. Brodsky (Joseph R. Brodsky, I.L.D. attorney, who gave the main report at the conference) has pointed out, in determining who is a political prisoner, we must look at the motivation, not at the crime charged. We can detect the other side of it, too.

For instance, rich people, bankers and others who are really criminals in the true sense of the word—it happens that such people get arrested sometimes. But they



Two drawings from Hugo Gellert's book, "Comrade Gulliver."

are given all the special privileges in the world. I remember quite distinctly, a banker in Fulton Tower, who had been arrested for swindling people out of quite a few thousand dollars. Every morning they would let him out for exercise. Every evening he could go out for a ride. They let his wife come to see him as often as she liked, and even stay overnight with him. These are privileges we know are given to those prisoners who are looked on as "leading citizens."

80 Years for Stealing Shoes

There is another particular phase of the question that we should understand about prisoners in the South—victims of frame-ups and national persecution. In Fulton Tower most of the people brought in during my stay there were young kids—Negro kids, ranging in age from 12 to 22 years. This is one of the instruments which they use to keep Negroes down as an oppressed nation.

For instance, in some cases a Negro might take a roll or a loaf of bread, an apple, or something of that sort. He is then placed in jail with hardened criminals. He is huddled up with this type of people, and even given a sentence which an able-bodied adult could not be able to withstand.

For example, there is an instance I know of personally, of a Negro boy of 14. He was supposed to have stolen a pair of shoes, I believe. In some way or another they made

out two cases against him, and gave him a sentence of 40 years on each. A kid of 14 facing 80 years on the chain-gang!

This is a situation which is true in every state of the South, because they know that it helps to keep people disorganized and divided, to impose these severe sentences on innocent individuals.

Campaign Can Win

To come back to the question of protecting the political prisoner. No doubt many people would be surprised to know just how effective a real campaign for the recognition of the status of political prisoners would be. When resolutions referring to me as a political prisoner were sent to Fulton Tower, the jailer had to come and discuss this with me. He said: "The law says you are guilty. To me you are no different from any other prisoners."

But at the same time this jailer, because of the protest, was forced to give me at times some special consideration.

Since we can force the jailers to recognize this status, in one way or another, I think that if the movement is intensified, if it is continued and broadened, we can not only force them to give special privileges to political prisoners, but we can force the enactment of a bill into law, providing for the punishment of jailers or wardens who attempt to deprive political prisoners of their rights as such.

