

Coal Operators' "Justice" --Southern Style

By TOM JOHNSON

WE were arrested at about 8 o'clock Saturday night in a well planned raid on the meeting of the leading committee of the strike.

Deputies had surrounded the isolated farmhouse where the meeting was in progress and succeeded in sticking up two comrades outside the house before they could give the alarm. Some of us were in the kitchen still eating supper when the thugs stepped simultaneously through the front and rear doors with drawn pistols in their hands. A glance around showed deputies at each window with their guns leveled at us in the house.

We were searched, loaded into cars and driven to Tazewell jail the same night. Monday afternoon we got an excellent example of coal operator "justice"—Southern style.

At our hearing before the local magistrate we found two prosecutors on the job—Sheriff Riley (the same operators' tool who kidnapped Weber and Duncan and turned them over to the Harlan law for the blood money in it) and the magistrate himself. The first act of the "judge" was to deny me the right to testify or speak in court because I stated my disbelief in God. As I was protesting against this procedure one of the spectators, a local insurance agent named Piedemore, came up to the judge's bench and in a stage whisper called to the magistrate, "Let's hang him right now, in here."

The magistrate shook his head in disagreement, undoubtedly disagreement with the time and place suggested for the lynching and not with the proposal itself.

Tazewell is 15 miles from the nearest mine and consequently few miners were in court. Local business men and half-starved farmers made up the audience. This call for a lynching was unquestionably representative of the attitude of the business men toward the "Reds", but not of the farmers.

As the hearing proceeded, man after man from the executive took the stand to explain the purpose of the meeting and the long bitter struggle against starvation that lay behind it. The starvation conditions which led to the first spontaneous walk out in the spring of 1931; the coming of the U.M.W.A. and the betrayal of the strike; the fighting program of the National Miners Union; the murder of strikers and strike leaders by gun thugs; the reign of bloody terror throughout the fields, were brought out clearly in our comrades' testimony. And as they testified, it became apparent that the sentiment of the crowd—or a portion of it—was changing.

As the hearing drew to a close a farmer in tattered overalls stepped out from the crowd and asked permission of the magistrate to "say a word or two". It was immediately granted, the magistrate evidently expecting another outburst against the "Reds".

But the magistrate was to be disappointed. "Judge," the farmer said, "these men must be set free. I'm starving myself and I know what they are up against in the mines. These are good men. I know three of them myself. Why, last fall, when I was trying to get food for my family by peddling farm truck over in Middlesboro, one of these men shared what we had in his house with me. These men are fighting for something to eat and they aren't criminals. I don't blame them for striking."

This was a different tune and one the judge decidedly did not like. The court was quickly cleared and we were marched back to jail. And what a jail! Picture a room 18 by 24 feet with wood and brick walls, once whitewashed and now covered with all manner of filth. In the center an iron cage 10 by 12 feet in which are crowded day and night seven men,—men who sleep on the bare steel deck with their overcoats wrapped around them. In front of the cage and along one side are two bunks and two narrow cots on which the 12 men outside the cage try to sleep—and try with small success.

A rickety pot-bellied stove, a toilet outside the cage and one inside, complete the picture. In stinking hole, fairly alive with bugs of all descriptions, are jammed a total of 19 men.

Daily attempts are made to bribe or bulldoze some of our comrades into repudiating the union. One at a time the local comrades are called out and promised immediate release and a guaranteed job if only they will turn on the "Reds".

Tonight we were favored with a visit from Finley Donaldson, former N.M.U. member, then stool pigeon, and now U.M.W.A. organizer. Accompanying this traitor was Turnblazer, district president of the U.M.W. Donaldson was fairly chased from the door by the men he had come to see, after betraying them.

The days pass swiftly with a daily lecture and discussion on some phases of the class struggle. As we sit close to the stove at night, the walls fairly shake with the "N.M.U. Song", composed by our comrades here in jail.

As one of the boys just told me: "Jail isn't so bad when you're in jail with the best men in Kentucky."