



Photo by H. O'Connor
EVEN DRINKING FOUNTAINS ARE SEGREGATED IN THE SOUTH

Race Discrimination in California

By JOHN OWENS

THE recent fight against attempts to segregate Negro and Mexican children in the public schools in the Palo Verde Valley, the cotton belt of southern California, is highly interesting because it clearly illustrates how changing economic conditions affect the social relations of the races.

It also clearly shows how the capitalist class always endeavors to twist a class struggle into a racial issue and make the Negro workers and farmers the butt of oppression, together, frequently, with other non-white groups.

I was a resident of the valley for five years, until forced to leave the latter part of January 1929, because of racial, economic and social oppression, and threatened physical violence. During this time I had been initiated into every phase of agricultural work, both as an agricultural laborer and a tenant farmer and share cropper. I have picked cotton, cleared land, built ditches and planted cotton and alfalfa. Each year the economic pressure forces more and more farmers and their children to abandon their homesteads. Tenancy and share-cropping is only carried on at the point of minimum existence in many instances. However, the plight of the agricultural laborer is deplorable. Very few can be sure of 150 steady days in the entire year. Most of the owners are in debt beyond any hope of redemption. Much of the land has reverted to the state for taxes.

There developed a chafing on the part of the blacks, whites and Mexicans against these economic fetters, but it was blind and misdirected and manifested itself in a ra-

cial complex rather than a class complex.

This attitude was subtly encouraged by the local administrative officials, the school authorities, local ginners, bankers etc. The issue of separate schools was raised as an objective in order to try to divide and split the unity of the workers and farmers. The local branch of the American Legion, extremely reactionary, kept trying to fan these racial smolderings into flame. One large landowner, J. B. Keim, was unduly rabid in his attempt to incite hatred against the Negroes, and in July 1928, published a vicious and slanderous attack against Negro workers and farmers in the Palo Verde Times.

Because of my radical inclinations, I had already been singled out for destruction. I had been guilty of advocating decent wages and living conditions for cotton pickers of all races, black, white and Mexicans, and equal school accommodations. Another factor which contributed toward my unpopularity was the fact that each week I distributed from 20 to 30 copies of the Negro Champion.

A concentrated drive was launched in order to force the Negroes to accept separate schools. Persuasion, intimidation, threats of unemployment, and like measures were employed. However, a persistent agitational program against the proposed measure was kept up. Prof. Geo. W. Scott, local school superintendent, was determined to force the Negroes and Mexicans to accept separate schools.

Charlotte Anita Whitney, of Oakland, came into the valley and delivered two stir-

ring addresses, advising us to stand firm. I also sold copies of the "Workers Party Platform" in front of the Masonic Hall in Blythe, where the meeting was held. This infuriated the local authorities. The Negroes boycotted segregation attempts and sent their children into the same rooms which they previously occupied. The segregation plan collapsed. Mass solidarity won the struggle.

I was singled out for much persecution because of my stand, which expressed itself in the following forms:

1. My landlord, J. B. Keim, failed to supply irrigation water according to contract, allowing most of my cotton to burn up on the stalk.

2. My wife was terrorized and refused county treatment by the local county physician, Dr. Byers, and it was only with extreme difficulty that she was admitted to Riverside County Hospital.

3. My three children were bullied and ostracised at school by direct orders of the supervisory officials. Frequently, the bus would deliberately leave them and they would be forced to walk four miles to school along a sparsely populated country road.

4. I was discriminated against when I went to sell what little cotton I did make and flatly refused contract prices, although I had a written agreement with the ginner.

5. The ginners (Pettit-Manush) allowed D. McMillan, a Ripley grocer, to garnishee without consulting me, my money at the gin for an alleged grocery bill. For picking four bales of cotton, I received the cash sum of \$26.00. The time required was from November 20th to January 24th.

But we won the school fight and we rallied many Negro farmers to the fight against discrimination.



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