

LIFE AMONG NEGRO FARMERS IN AMERICA.

There are about 12,000,000 Negroes in the United States. The vast majority of these blacks are on the land, either as agricultural wage laborers share croppers or poor farmers. They live in certain sections of America known as the Southern States. In some of these states they are so thickly concentrated that they form a sort of black country of their own called "The Black Belt". And strange to say, it is in these very territories that the Negroes suffer the most brutal oppression.

White ruling class terrorism is so widespread throughout "the Black Belt", that from time to time whole communities of Negro workers move away and seek new homes in the Northern States and other parts of America, where they are able to buy arms and thereby protect themselves against mob law.

The most wide spread method of terrorism practiced in the South among the black farming population is what is known as Peonage. This is the most brutal and demoralising form of economic exploitation. It has its basis in the rent and profit system which grew out of chattel slavery. After the Negroes were "freed" from slavery, they had no land of their own, or the means whereby to gain a livelihood, so they were compelled to remain on the plantations of their masters. Some of them sold their labour power for wages, while others entered into a sort of feudal contract relationship which bound them to the land like serfs. The landlords allotted a certain quantity of land to each black family, and supplied tools, seed, and food to the tenants until the harvest was reaped. The crop is then taken over by the landlord who sells it and afterwards made an account to the tenant. The tenants always given less than what the crop was sold for, and in this way is continually indebted to the landlord. For example, if a Negro cultivated a hundred bales of cotton which fetched 600 dollars on the market, the landlord will present him with an account of 800 dollars for supplies alleged to have been rendered during the year, so even if the Negro paid 600 dollars he should still owe the landlord 200 dollars which he would be compelled to pay off by planting another crop under similar conditions as before.

This is repeated year after year. Even if the Negro took the landlord to court his statement of the facts would not be believed, because the word of the white man can not be refuted by a black. Furthermore,

the Southern landlords are not only the overseers and bookkeepers of their plantations, but are the political dictators of the community as well; and when they make a statement it become the law of the court. It is always the prerogative of the ruling class of the South to determine when Negro workers should leave their service, or under what conditions they are bound.

Negroes who rebel against these outrages and run away are arrested by the police and other uniformed thugs with the aid of blood hounds especially trained for this purpose. They are brought back to the plantations and turned over to the landlords either as vagrants or as run-aways.

Another method by which labour is recruited is through the chain-gang. Whenever the landlords need labour they simply go the local judge and arrange that the police be ordered to arrest the required number of workers. In this way whole communities of able bodied blacks are commonly apprehended. All kinds of form-up charges are made against them. When find in court they have to agree to enter the service of the landlords who pay a small fine for the opportunity to reduce the Negroes to involuntary servitude. In this way the judges and the police get the court fees, and the landlords cheap labour.

A brief account from one of the peonage districts is sufficient to illustrate this point. Passing along the street where a Negro had been mistreated by his white master, an observer inquired of the worker: "Why do you stand this?" "That is just the damned trouble down here" responded the black. "I once complained to the court when another white man beat me, the man denied it and the judge believed his story imposed upon me a fine which I could not pay, so I have to work it out in the services of this man who was present in the court at that time and paid it in order to get the opportunity to force me to work for him."

Whenever there is a shortage of labour the Southern capitalists carry out these repressive measures. Thousands of blacks are still being held as slaves in the coal mines and on road construction work in the state of Alabama, Mississippi, Texas and Georgia. A new law was enacted in the State of Florida in 1919 to the effect, that whenever a Negro is unable to pay his debts he is to be imprisoned, and the jailer has the right to rent him out to a farmer until such time as the farmer is satisfied to release him.

Just a few days ago a white man by the name of Wilson, who owns a 7,000 acre farm near Greenwood, Mississippi, went into the country of Moxabee, scouting for Negro farm labourers. He had signed up 25 coloured workers and had chartered two freight cars for their transportation to Greenwood, when the business-men and plantation owners in Moxabee discovered Wilson's activities. They immediately organized a small band of 100 men and drove Wilson out of the town. The Negroes who had dared to sign up to leave were stripped naked and most brutally flogged in public as a warning to other blacks never to attempt to migrate.

There is a special law in Mississippi which makes it a criminal offense punished by fine or imprisonment for agents to enter the State and contract for labour. This law was enacted in order to prevent Negro tenants and agricultural labourers from leaving their masters no matter how badly they were treated, or how high the wage offered by other employers outside of the State.

A recent investigation has disclosed the existence of large peonage farms in the extreme Southern part of Florida. Over 5,000 Negroes have been collected from various parts of the State and lured away to toil in the turpentine camps where they are forced to work day and night under armed guards. Life in these places is indescribable hell-holes. The workers are huddled together in shacks, given a minimum amount of food of the worst quality, and denied the most elementary

sanitary conveniences. Conditions are more primitive than in some colonial countries. As a result, disease is very rampant in these barbed-wire compounds. Hundreds of blacks die annually from starvation and exposure, while others meet a quicker and more welcome death at the hands of their cruel task masters.

Negro farmers and agricultural labourers are completely segregated from all forms of social intercourse with whites in the South

They are not even allowed to ride in the same coaches with the whites. Wherever railroad companies agreed to permit them to travel they are provided with small dirty wooden compartments, for which they have to pay the same fare as the white passengers, who enjoy the most up-to-day railroad conveniences. In street-cars, Negroes, get in and off from the rear end, while the white enter from the front and have priority to the best seats. In those places where Negroes are admitted to the theatres they are huddled together in filthy balconies far removed from the stage.

Black farmers are not permitted to patronise restaurants which cater to whites; neither are they allowed to use the same public bathing beaches, or entrances to buildings as other people. Negroes are barred at libraries, museums, art galleries, and other centres of culture. Very limited educational opportunities are offered them. In most places they are compelled to send their children to separate schools, and as to be expected the capitalist State expends by far more money on the education of white children than black ones, although the Negro workers are made to pay the same taxes for the maintenance of the public school system.

Politically, Negroes in the South are completely dis-franchised. This is done with open violence and terror. On election days, armed white mobs, agents of the capitalists, keep the Negroes away from the polls in the Southern States. Certain enactments known as the "Black Laws", have been incorporated in the Statutes of some States in order to more effectively deprive the Negroes of their political rights. These laws are chiefly based on property and educational qualifications. As the majority of Negroes are propertyless, and their standard of literacy is a matter to be determined by the capitalist politicals, it becomes very easy for them to be ruled off the ballot.

Wherever one goes in the South one sees a striking similarity in the appearance of black communities derisively called "Nigger Towns". The outstanding feature of these ghettos are their very unsanitary conditions. For the bourgeois politicians although they impel the Negroes to pay the same amount of taxes as the whites, they never spend any money to improve the standard of life among the black workers. Epidemics frequently break out in these settlements, taking heavy toll among the workers, especially their children. The death-rate among Negro farmers is in some cases 50% higher than whites. This is especially so in the case of contagious diseases such as tuberculosis, typhus, etc.

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