

America Has Its Chain Gangs

Southern Bosses Enslave Workers thru Prison System which Prevails in Many States; Persecute Negroes

By JIM ALLEN

TSARIST Russia had its Siberia; the Balkans has its underground inquisition dungeons, Venezuela, its torture chambers, France, its Devil's Island—and America has its chain gangs.

But first you must know that the South is a semi-feudal domain in which the tenant farmers, forty-five per cent of the total farm population, are an oppressed group similar to the peasantry of Poland, or even of India and Egypt; that the working class of the South has the lowest standard of living than any other section of the American proletariat.

That of the Southern toilers, nine million are Negroes, forming a super-exploited and super-persecuted group, similar to the "untouchables" of India. That in spite of the growth of industry in the South in recent years, it is still an agricultural land, having fifty per cent of the farms in the country, run on the general lines of a feudal plantation system.

Know this, and you can conceive of the

existence of chain gangs. To a ruling class whose wealth is built on peonage and tenantry, which permits wide sections of the Negro population in certain parts of Mississippi to remain ignorant of the fact that chattel slavery has been abolished by law, whose industrial workers are kept to the bare necessities of life, whose "law" hangs Negroes from trees, burns them at the stake and shoots them like dogs in the dark alleys of the cities—to such a ruling class the chain gang is at once a blessing and a defense.

"Chain gang" is a literal term. It means chains and it means work. When the prisoner is brought to the camp or stockade, chains are immediately welded around his ankles. They are not removed until he is released. There is just enough "spread" in the chains to enable him to walk, but not to run. *With these heavy chains on his feet, he must wield a forty-eight-pound sledge hammer in slippery quarries, or labor under the hot sun on the state farms or*

in the cypress swamps of Mississippi and Alabama, or in the turpentine swamps of Georgia, or on the public roads.

In most cases he is not permitted to change clothes but once a week. He works from sun-up to sun-down. For food he gets the crudest and cheapest. He works, eats and sleeps in his chains. A county in Alabama recently boasted that it was cheaper to feed its prisoners than to feed mules. It cost them fourteen and one-half cents a day to feed a prisoner, while it cost fifty-five cents a day to feed a mule.

Under such conditions, it is to be expected that the most brutal forms of torture and punishment are used to subject "unruly" prisoners. Recently there crept into a secluded spot of some Southern newspapers, two chain gang incidents. On a chain gang in North Carolina a Negro prisoner was shot to death by a camp guard because he threw stones at him. At Cordele, Georgia, a twenty-three-year-old Negro chain gang prisoner was killed by a guard because he was "boisterous." Another prisoner, Willie Bellamy, died in a North Carolina chain gang camp from "sweat-box" treatment, and being hit over the head with a blackjack while confined to the box. In most cases deaths on chain gangs go by unnoticed, except for the official evasion, "died of natural causes."

The chain gang bosses are the scum of the earth, coming from the same layer as the Tammany cossacks and the coal-and-iron police. Whipping posts, torture boxes, starvation diets and plain murder are in the daily routine of a camp. A petty punishment is forcing the prisoner to wear, in addition to his chains, two-foot steel spikes, fastened to his ankles, one in front and one in back. It is almost impossible to move, but he is forced to go through the regular routine of work.

Chain gang prisoners near Boone, North Carolina, described how drunken bosses beat the prisoners with pickhandles, blackjacks and guns, and how they were forced to ride in trucks without any brakes, down the hill roads. A former chain gang prisoner in a camp near Atlanta, Georgia, told us how he was forced to work in the quarry pit after he had broken his rib in a fall. In the forsaken swamps and woods of Georgia and Mississippi the chain gangs are torture hells, where a Balkan jailer could learn new lessons in sadistic punishment. Only a native Southern toiler, hard-



Chain gang prisoners on road work in a Southern City. Similar scenes are seen thruout the South.

(Left) Turpentine swamp in which chain gang prisoners work. The accompanying article, written by the editor of the Southern Worker, Birmingham, Ala., gives a vivid description of the chain gang in all its vicious phases. On the next page will be found a typical "Vagrancy" warrant on which hundreds of Negro and white workers are arrested. Where is Matthew Woll and his shrill cries about "forced labor?"

ened to daily suffering, can live through a chain gang term.

Thus, the Southern ruling class punishes its rebel slaves, and at the same time gives the state free labor. The state, not to be outdone in generosity, arrests unemployed workers on vagrancy charges, and rents them out to private plantation owners, as slave labor.

The chain gang, like lynch law, is used by the Southern ruling class as an instrument of suppression. The sharper the economic exploitation, the sharper the persecution. The Negro is, therefore, the most frequent victim of the chain gang system, although there are also a large number of poor white farm tenants and workers to be found in the gangs. Should a Negro share-cropper attempt to run away from the plantation he is either forced to accept peonage on the plantation itself or on the state chain gang.

Today in the period of mass misery and unemployment, the vagrancy laws are again put into vicious use, in a manner similar to the days of their origin immediately after the Civil War. At that time the vagrancy laws were used to compel every freed Negro to enter service somewhere at

whatever wages were offered him, or be put to work in the chain gang.

The laws work in much the same way today except that they have been broadened to take in white workers also, especially militant workers fighting against starvation. It is not infrequent for unemployed workers to be picked up on the street, and sentenced for vagrancy, to work on the chain gangs and on the state farms. Systematic police raids have been carried out by the police along the water front in Houston, with the purpose of supplying free labor for the City Pea Farm.

And still another use has been discovered for the vagrancy laws and the chain gangs. The United States Steel Corporation, stretching its iron claws into the South and taking possession of the great coal, iron-ore and steel center at Birmingham, Alabama, utilizes the native feudal forms of persecution to keep its industrial slaves from or-

ganizing. Four Communist organizers at Birmingham have a number of charges of vagrancy against them, with the threat of the chain gang over them. What company gunmen could not do, they hope to achieve with the chain gang—murder with the full-hearted aid of the state. That is Southern ruling class tyranny, which knows no bounds in brutality to preserve its semi-feudal domination.

WARRANT

DREW'S FORM P. C. 427

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In Court of County Judge,

State of Florida }
 Carl A. Moore, alias Harry Moore, Baby A. Moore, Pork Chops alias Harry Harris, Howards alias Howard Jones, Slim alias Freddie Jones and John Doe alias Eddy, Everett Dubois }
 Gilchrist County,
 State of Florida.

In the name of the State of Florida, to the Sheriff or any Constable of said County:

Whereas, A. D. Fields

has this day made oath before me that on the 19 day of February
 A. D. 1930, in the County aforesaid, XX Carl A. Moore alias Harry Moore, Baby A. Moore, Pork Chops alias Harry Harris, Howards alias Howard Jones, Slim alias Freddie Jones and John Doe alias Eddy, Everett Dubois
 were rogues and vagabonds, idle or dissolute persons, common gamblers, persons who use unlawful games or plays, common pipers and fiddlers, common drunkards, common night walkers, thieves, pilferers, lewd, wanton and lascivious persons, common railers and brawlers, persons who neglect their calling or employment, or are without reasonable continuous employment or regular income and who have not sufficient property to sustain them, persons wandering or strolling around from place to place without any lawful purpose or object, habitual loafers, idle and disorderly persons, persons neglecting all lawful business and habitually spending their time by frequently houses of ill fame, gaming houses or tippling shops

contrary to the statute in such cases made and provided, and against the peace and dignity of the State of Florida:

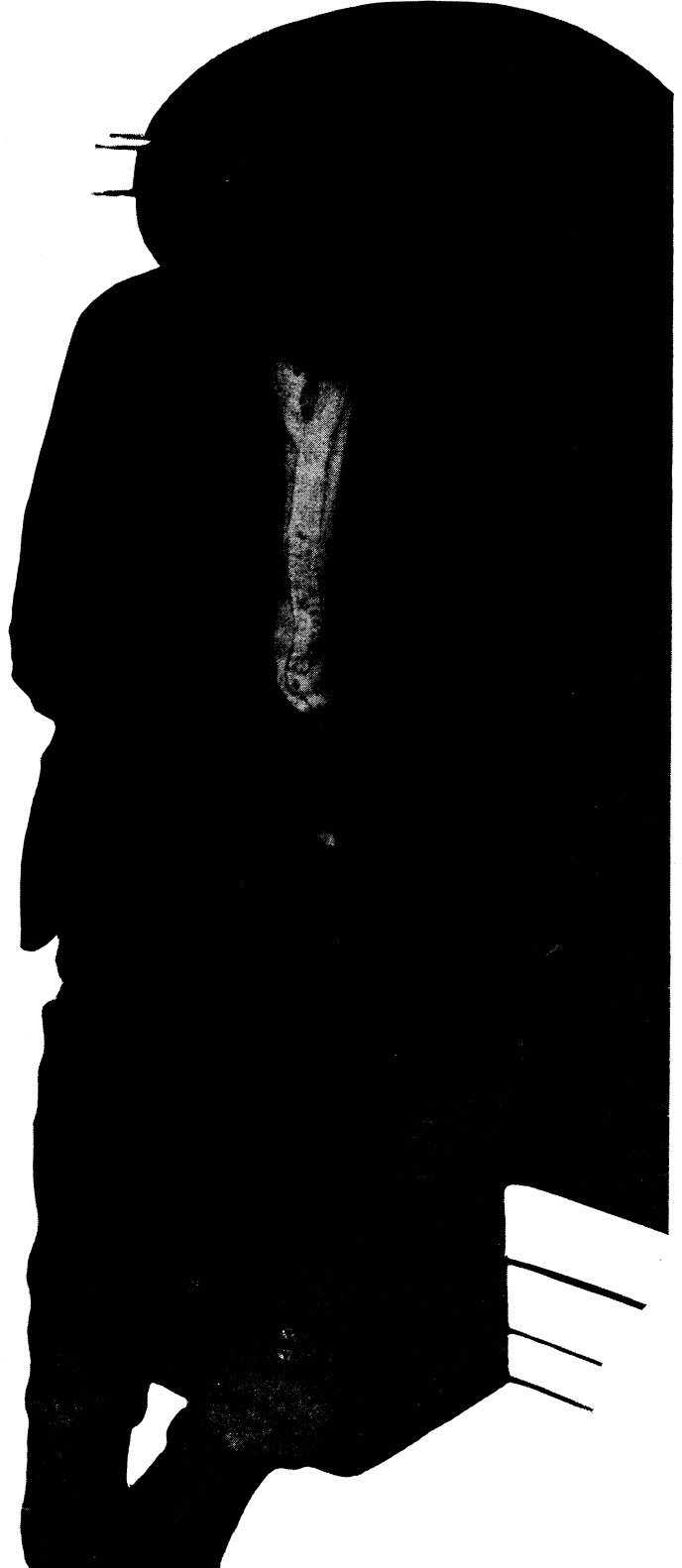
These are, therefore, to command you to arrest instantly the said Carl A. Moore alias Harry Moore, Baby A. Moore, Pork Chops alias Harry Harris, Howards alias Howard Jones, Slim alias Freddie Jones and John Doe alias Eddy, Everett Dubois and bring them before me to be dealt with according to law.

Given in duplicate under my hand and seal this 19 day of February

A. D. 19 30

[Signature] (Seal)
 County Judge, Gilchrist County

"Vagrancy" warrant. Names are fictitious, to create impression that the "vagrants" is a vicious criminal. Note "crimes" listed. On such warrants organizers of Trade Union Unity League and Communist Party are arrested.



"AT HOME": Jobless Negro on 155th Street bridge, New York. (Photo by Montgomery)