

The Scottsboro Struggle

By JAMES S. ALLEN

I.

SOUTHERN lynch justice has again spoken, in a new tone but with the same meaning. Heywood Patterson, first of the Scottsboro boys to come up for a new trial, has again been sentenced to the electric chair by the lynch court in Decatur, Alabama.

Between the original trial at Scottsboro and the Decatur farce, two years of mass protest had intervened. This movement had already succeeded not only in changing the tone in which Southern lynch justice pronounced its grinning sentence, but in forcing into the open a number of issues basic to the Negro liberation struggle. Without this movement the trial at Decatur would have been impossible; it would have been impossible to have carried through such a consistent struggle for Negroes on the jury, typifying the struggle for the whole range of democratic rights for the Negro people. Southern lynch justice had been forced to the position where it had to permit not only the presentation of evidence showing the boys to be innocent, but a direct frontal attack in one of its own lynch courts against the system of national oppression, in this instance, characterized by the exclusion of Negroes from jury service.

The trial at Decatur registered the fact that the Scottsboro movement had reached a new and higher stage. At Scottsboro, before any mass protest could gather strength, the Southern ruling class attempted an open, brazen and unashamed legal lynching. At Decatur it had already been forced into the position where it attempted to carry through a quiet, respectable, "impartial" legal lynching, camouflaged by a farcical design of deliberation and fairness. In this way, it was hoped to defend lynch justice against nation-wide and international accusation, by creating the impression that the sentence had been honestly and fairly arrived at after the defense had received every opportunity to present its evidence. Judge Horton was the highest expression of this new maneuver that the Southern ruling class had been forced to take by the mass movement. He was *the* official lyncher for the Scottsboro bourbons, dressed in sheep's clothing to hide the fangs of lynch justice.

But the meaning of the sentence is unmistakable. It is a lynch sentence meant at one and the same time to justify the system

which produced Scottsboro and to serve as a warning to the millions of Negro people that they dare not challenge Jim-Crow, class justice. It is meant to quench the gathering struggles of the black and white masses against the capitalist offensive of hunger, war and national persecution. It is a challenge to the masses of Negro people and white toilers. Precisely in this light has it been accepted by the masses. Instead of crushing the movement, it has served as a powerful stimulus for the struggle around Scottsboro. It has set large sectors of the masses into motion, not only for the freedom of the nine innocent Negro boys, but against the whole system of national oppression which Scottsboro symbolizes.

Within an hour after the announcement of the verdict, tens of thousands of men, women and children in Negro districts of cities throughout the country swarmed into the streets. The tremendous élan of the movement was manifested by the response of the Harlem population, which in several days produced 50,000 protest signatures calling for a march on Washington. It was shown by the impromptu demonstrations of thousands of black and white people on the occasion of the arrival of the leading defense attorney and of Mrs. Patterson. The same élan marked the movement in other cities, even in Richmond, Virginia, where the slogan of the march on Washington was immediately picked up, and where, on the impetus of the movement, a committee of 100 was formed to demand democratic rights for Negroes. The promptness with which the Negro masses had grasped the broader issues at stake was shown by these actions. In the deep South, while the response of the Negro masses was necessarily more restrained, there was a profound stirring characterized by the action of Negro workers on a Birmingham city relief job, who, during the course of the first week of the trial when the question of Negroes on the jury was being argued, demanded of their foreman that they get wages equal to those of the whites on the same job.

These and similar actions by the Negro masses, and also large portions of white workers in the North, were to all appearances spontaneous. The sweep of the movement indicated the mass resentment, bursting through many pre-conceived limitations and for the most part taking its own form as it went along. It must be understood that the two-year long movement led by the Communist Party and the International Labor Defense had to a large measure prepared the ground for just such actions.

The masses are in motion, not only for the freedom of the Scottsboro boys but also for their constitutional rights. The demand for the march on Washington arose from the masses, although it was immediately picked up by the owner of the *Amsterdam*

News, a Harlem newspaper. The Party and the I.L.D., reacting immediately to this spontaneous demand of the masses, became the organizers of this march through the various united front bodies set up around the Scottsboro case. Seizing upon this spontaneous act, the Party saved it from sizzling out in harmless signature signing and declarations, by immediately giving it an aim and purpose in correspondence with this new level in the mass movement. The Bill of Rights borne to Washington by this march, is the expression of the broad social and political issues already raised in the Scottsboro movement, and confronts the Roosevelt administration squarely with the demand to enforce the Constitutional Amendments which have remained dead letters since Reconstruction.

II.

The rapidity with which the Negro masses were aroused and large sections of them set into motion, reveals how deeply the roots of Scottsboro are embedded in the conditions of national oppression of the Negro people. All strata of the Negro population are directly involved and concerned in the case. The issues raised have gone far beyond the narrow scope of just one outstanding and dramatic instance of national oppression. The Scottsboro boys have become symbolic of the oppression of the Negroes and, even more, of the fight against that oppression.

Scottsboro has kindled the will to struggle of the Negro people. The Scottsboro case is fast becoming the pivotal point for the development of the struggle for Negro liberation. The issues involved in the Scottsboro case—those which have already come to the surface and those still present only potentially—encompass *all* the issues raised in the struggle for Negro liberation. Upon the rapidity with which the broad sections of the Negro masses are swept into motion will depend the rapidity with which all issues basic to the Negro liberation struggle will be raised.

From the very first day, the Scottsboro case had already ceased to be an isolated event, disconnected from the varied grievances of the Negro people. Because of the charge of rape, the circumstances connected with the arrest and trial of the Negro boys, the case symbolized from its inception the social oppression of the Negroes. As the mass movement under Communist leadership proceeded, sharpening the issues which the ruling class hoped to stifle, and rousing the resistance of the Negro masses, the Scottsboro struggle quickly began to assume the character of a major challenge to the lynch law system. The pet rape device hallowed by a century of lynching was being stripped of its effectiveness; the denial of the charges of a white woman—so that the world could hear, and

particularly the white masses could hear,—was an unpardonable sin. And to cap the climax the raising of the issue of the denial of the democratic rights to the Negro masses in the South epitomized by the struggle for the right of Negroes to sit on juries, was striking at one of the most vulnerable points in the system of social exclusion which had been built up after years of bitter struggle and with great difficulty.

The trial at Decatur released the flood which had been accumulating over two years of the mass defense movement. The courtroom was a stage upon which was being paraded the system of “white superiority” forced out in its full regalia by the persistent drive of the defense movement. The challenge of this by the defense, the courage of the local Negroes who came to testify, the fact that two Southern whites appeared as the star witnesses for the defense—all of which were the results of the two-year pitiless mass pounding — produced the effect of releasing the accumulated resentment and anger of the Negro people. The very fact that such broad strata of the Negroes were set into motion was in itself raising issues peculiar to these strata and the conditions under which they lived, and creating the conditions for the raising of further issues.

The Scottsboro case is proving to be one of those instances of national oppression, which, as Lenin pointed out, can well arouse all the potential revolutionary force of an oppressed people. What Lenin has pointed out in respect to oppressed peoples in general, has special significance for the American Negroes due to the sharp character of their social oppression and the long historical accumulation of issues which have never been solved. The paramount issues of equal rights, land, political freedom—not to go beyond the democratic questions involved—have been presented for revolutionary solution before. They were the core of the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War and after a temporary highly uncertain solution were again dissolved and have been permitted to hang fire ever since. The Scottsboro case is serving as the lighting rod signalling with a flash each one of these issues as they strike anew.

History never says the same thing twice in exactly the same tone. Although the South is again beginning to speak of “State Rights,” recalling the slave and Civil War periods, and “land and freedom” is the slogan which the Negro peasant masses are beginning to grasp as their own, these words are uttered with a new force and have a different meaning due to the full historic period which has intervened. The issues left unsolved by a previous revolution have been taken to the bosom of the modern, proletarian move-

ment. The leadership of the struggle for Negro rights has gone to the Communist Party, signifying the helplessness and ineffectiveness of both the white and Negro bourgeois democratic elements, and denoting the broad scope being defined for the proletarian revolution in this country.

III.

The Scottsboro case is also the slate upon which the Negro masses are practicing their political A B C. Before the case is over, the whole range of deception which can be produced by the representatives of those classes opposing the proletariat will have been exhausted.

The main political significance of the earlier stage in the Scottsboro struggle rested in the fight between revolutionary forces led by the Communist Party and reformist forces represented by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The struggle went far beyond the question of who shall carry through the legal defense of the Scottsboro boys. It was a struggle between two opposing class forces. The reformist elements around the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People representing the line of capitulation to the American imperialists, aimed to stifle the mass movement, confining it within the limits of bourgeois legality. The revolutionary forces, under the leadership of the Communist Party, representing the line of relentless struggle against capitalism and national oppression, aimed to weld the unity of the white and Negro masses in a powerful mass movement for the defense of the Scottsboro boys as an integral part of the struggle against the entire system of National oppression. If the N. A. A. C. P. had been the victor in this early struggle—not only in the purely legal question of defense but on the more important point of ideological leadership over the Negro masses—the struggle would have been stifled and its revolutionary potentialities left undeveloped. With the Communist Party registering a decisive victory by establishing its hegemony over the Scottsboro movement, the proletariat had obtained a foothold for establishing its hegemony over the Negro liberation struggle itself. This early defeat of the N. A. A. C. P.—although it was far from destroying the influence of bourgeois reformist elements over the Negro people—removed at least partially one of the main obstacles in the development of the mass movement around Scottsboro. Without having accomplished this preliminary task, it would have been impossible to proceed with the mobilizing of a mass movement.

The fact that the N. A. A. C. P. was forced to practically rescind its statement attacking the Communists which it had issued

on the day following the Decatur verdict, showed how completely the N. A. A. C. P. had been defeated at least temporarily. It recoiled at the realization that to attack the Communists in the face of the seething mass movement would place a rope around its own neck. Its second statement, while containing an underhanded, hypocritical attack upon the Communists, was at the same time forced to announce "cooperation" in the collection of funds for the defense. This was a concrete expression, not only of the effects of the mass pressure, but of the ferment which is taking place within the ranks of the N.A.A.C.P. as shown in the participation of numerous branches in the united front and particularly by the St. Louis demonstration in which the local N. A. A. C. P. took part.

But this by no means signifies that the Communist Party is guaranteed the unchallenged leadership over the Scottsboro movement. That will depend upon how well we are able to broaden and deepen the movement, encompassing all the democratic masses set in motion by the future developments in the case, and guard against the exclusion of any of the popular democratic needs of these masses. It will also depend upon our ability to effectively disperse the democratic and other illusions common to such mass movements and inculcate it with an understanding of the direction it is traveling and the points at issue. We must sensitize the movement, make it receptive to the next steps raised by the logic of events and development.

The broad strata of the Negro masses who have been activated by the Scottsboro case, bring with them many petty-bourgeois illusions which are the soil in which the reformists implant their influence. That is why the first preliminary setback to the N.A.A. C.P. by no means signifies that nothing more is to be feared from that quarter. If it is not the N.A.A.C.P. there will be other organizations and individuals to take its place. History by no means guarantees in advance that the broad strata of the Negro population, holding varied and confused views, many dominated by ideas alien to the class-conscious proletariat, will simply fall into the organizations of the Communist movement. In the end they will join the broad stream of the proletarian revolution. But they will arrive via various by-paths and after having passed through varied experiences. They will set up their own organizations, of a non-class-conscious character, which might even be directly opposed to the organizations of the working class. Such, for instance, would be Negro bourgeois nationalist organizations which might crop up on the wave of the Scottsboro case or gain a new lease of life as a result of it. Others of an objectively national-revolutionary char-

acter, but strongly dominated by petty-bourgeois ideology and "race consciousness," are even more likely to exert great influence. In any case, while appreciating the broad scope of the Scottsboro movement, we must at the same time realize that a long struggle still lies ahead if we are to establish the unchallenged leadership of the Communist Party in this movement. And when we use the word "struggle" we do not mean it in its narrow sense, but rather in the sense of great flexibility in being able to encompass the popular demands of the Negro masses within the general scope of our program and to channelize this popular movement into the general stream of the proletarian revolution.

It is precisely at this stage of the movement, however, where as a result of the Decatur verdict ever larger sections of the masses have been set into motion that the Negro reformists are desperately rallying their forces for a concerted drive to wrest the leadership of the movement from the revolutionary forces. The march to Washington is quickly crystallizing the points at issue between the various elements in the Scottsboro movement. The march will confront the Roosevelt administration squarely with the Negro question, which will serve to further compromise the governmental party whose main political strength is in the South and one of whose principal political tenets lies in the support of the lynch law system.

Realizing that the march is the highest expression yet attained of the mass movement, the forces of reaction are rapidly mobilizing to smash this march hoping to strike a heavy blow at the mass movement as a whole. A leading role in this is being played by the Democrats, particularly Tammany Hall, which is at the same time trying to "cash in" on the mass resentment among the Negroes for political gains.

The march is at the same time a testing ground for the various bourgeois and reformist elements who have professed willingness in one way or another to go along in the united front. Mr. Davis, of the *Amsterdam News*, is already frightened by the seriousness with which the masses took up the proposal for the march, is slyly attempting to deprive it of its mass character by suggesting to substitute for it a delegation of "representative citizens" to Washington to lay the petitions at the President's feet. The *Chicago Defender*, attempting in typical petty-bourgeois fashion to keep the movement within legal and "respectable" bounds, declared "that if the Scottsboro boys are to be saved it will be through the proper legal channels. . . . It [Chicago Defender] knows that the orderly process of courts is not influenced by petitions. It knows also that President Roosevelt has nothing to do with the courts, and that he will say as much when and if the peti-

tion is presented to him. . . . That is why *The Chicago Defender* is taking no part in the great petition drive."

Taking their cue from Judge Horton and the Southern lynch press, the withdrawal of the I. L. D. from the case has now become one of the most important demands of the enemies of the masses. The Negro reformists, as well as the Southern white press, are attempting to shift the responsibility for the infamous verdict at Decatur to the I. L. D. and its tactics. The uniformity of their declarations are striking.

Thus *The Chattanooga News*, whose editor, George Milton, is a member of the Southern Interracial Commission and heads a committee which has just issued a "report" on lynching, states:

"We call upon the International Labor Defense to withdraw from the case. It has overreached itself and exposed its callous indifference to the real issues. We believe that Alabama will provide adequate, fair counsel for the Negroes and that in a new atmosphere, the trial may proceed."

The type of counsel that Alabama (and Tennessee also) provides for Negroes was shown adequately enough at the first trial in Scottsboro where a local lawyer together with the Chattanooga Kluxer Roddy was appointed by the court to "defend" the boys. And it is well to recall that Mr. Milton, at that time, had called the trial "fair" and issued a statement in the name of the Chattanooga Interracial Commission denouncing the I. L. D.

"When the Communist organization, the International Labor Defense, barged into the case the doom of the lads was sealed," declared the Negro "socialist" George S. Schuyler, writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier* on April 22, 1933. He devotes his whole column to a vicious attack upon the I. L. D. and its tactics and calls for the support of the—N. A. A. C. P.

The Pittsburgh Courier, which is a semi-official organ of the N. A. A. C. P., declared editorially in its issue of April 22 (which seems to have been devoted almost entirely to an attack upon the I. L. D.) that "In our opinion, the case has reached the stage of exaggeration. There has been too much publicity; too much sectional recrimination; too much racial emphasis; and too much personal feeling." And in order to seem absolutely democratic, it goes on to demand the withdrawal of everybody (with the exception of Judge Horton) thus far connected with the case—Attorney-General Knight, the N. A. A. C. P., the I. L. D.—"We believe sincerely that the I.L.D., known as a wing of the Communist Party, should gracefully withdraw. . . ."

The ruling class—from Washington to Decatur—is alarmed at the sweep of the movement set loose by the Scottsboro Case,

sensing its present and potential danger to white ruling class hegemony. The Negro reformists—even of the “left,” demagogic variety—are alarmed at the growing threat to their own influence within the Negro people based upon bourgeois Negro nationalism. They are fearful of the mass seething which is fast seeking the road of alliance with the white working class, which has been anathema to the ruling class and the Negro reformists alike.

As the Scottsboro struggle proceeds, sharpening the class antagonisms with each new action and each issue which crops up, the forces of reaction are attempting to mobilize every possible ally against the mass movement. In New York, Attorney Liebowitz who admits he is an organization Democrat, has become a center around whom all the reactionary forces, including the Negro reformists of all shades, are gathering in an attempt to utilize his popularity to wrest the legal defense from the I. L. D., to set up an “independent defense committee” with the exclusion of the Communist and revolutionary forces. Such a course of action is being very broadly “hinted at” by the Negro reformist newspapers, particularly by the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Meetings are being organized by these elements, in cooperation with Tammany Hall, with Liebowitz as the main center of “attraction.” In this way they are attempting to smash the movement (at the time of writing particularly the march to Washington) and thus objectively clear the way for more “impartial” legal lynchings.

Attorney Liebowitz appeared as a representative of bourgeois democracy, giving voice in the courtroom at Decatur and after, to many illusions about capitalist justice and democracy. He was placed in a position, where, as the defense lawyer in a trial the general policies of which had been determined by the International Labor Defense, he had to strike out persistently both for the democratic rights of Negroes as expressed by the demand for Negroes on juries and against the “white superiority” autocracy as expressed in the establishment of the innocence of the Negro boys despite the word of a white woman. Both these tasks demanded of him were entirely within the bounds of bourgeois liberalism and the issues that have so far found full expression in the case itself have not gone beyond the sphere of political democratic demands. But in regard to these demands he gave voice to illusions still common among the masses—such as the “fairness” of Judge Horton, faith in the Supreme Court at Washington, etc. The petty-bourgeois Negro leaders therefore rightly considered him more akin to themselves than the Communists, and for the Negro masses influenced by petty-bourgeois ideology he was more representative of their habitual mode of thinking.

The statement condemning all Southern whites as morons, which Liebowitz is alleged to have issued soon after the verdict was handed down in Decatur, objectively gave support alike to the "white superiority" front fostered by the Southern ruling class and the reactionary nationalism of Negro "race leaders." The Negro misleaders, from Booker T. Washington to DuBois and Garvey, have attempted to indoctrinate the Negro masses with the conception that the white workers and the "poor whites" are the worst and most dangerous enemies of the Negro. This is the pivotal point around which the Negro reformists today build their attack upon the Communist Party and the mass protest movement of the black and white masses.

It would of course be ridiculous for Communists to demand that all those entering upon a revolutionary movement first discard all their illusions. Such illusions can only be dispelled in the course of struggle. The overcoming of illusions among the masses is a process, rooted alike in the stability or instability of the conditions which gave rise to them and in the ability of the revolutionary Party to take advantage of every opportunity to expose them. Events do not of themselves, in some mysterious abstract manner, teach the masses. These events must be underlined and brought home to the masses, by a Party driving persistently toward its goal. This is the role that the Party must play in the Scottsboro movement, at the same time raising the next logical issues inherent in the further development of the movement.

One of the illusions which has already been dispelled in the course of the Decatur phase of the Scottsboro case is the belief that it would only be necessary to present conclusive evidence that the nine Negro boys are innocent and have been framed up in order to obtain their freedom. The popular masses, both white and Negro, have learned otherwise and this is an important step towards extending the mass movement. The shattering of this illusion by the Decatur verdict, after the innocence of the boys had been conclusively established during the trial, contributed to the release of the spontaneous mass protest.

Liebowitz constitutes a danger to proletarian hegemony in the Scottsboro movement because of the opportunity he offers for the retrenchment of the Negro reformist organizations and the capitalist political parties among the Negro masses.

To the extent that we are able to swing the broad Negro masses into motion on issues which they recognize as their own, at the same time appearing as the inspirers and leaders of these actions and isolating our enemies on the basis of these actions and issues, will

depend our success in defeating these alien influences in the struggle for Negro liberation.

IV.

In the further development of the Scottsboro struggle an important task is the winning of the *white workers* and swinging them into action on the specific issues as they are raised in the Scottsboro Case. The Negro masses are still to be convinced that the white workers, not singly but in decisive masses, can disassociate themselves from the ruling ideology of "white superiority" to the extent of actually joining with the Negro masses in a fight for Negro rights. This is the kernel around which the Negro reformists have built their whole case against the Communists. The point is not that they are wrong by all the laws of social development. The point is that the Scottsboro case can be made to accelerate this inevitable change in the attitude and actions of the white workers, and to the degree that it does this, will the influence of the Negro reformists and bourgeois democrats be decisively undermined.

The rapidity and the completeness with which the Scottsboro case accomplishes this depends, of course, upon the further development of the movement, the depths of the issues which both the Negro and white workers recognize as their own and act upon. Should the Scottsboro case turn out to be the spark kindling the struggle of the Negro peasantry in the Black Belt, the "poor whites" will be just as vitally concerned with the issue of land and find it necessary to break loose from the ideology of "white superiority" which has chained them to the ruling class. This process will be easier and more rapid for the white workers, especially in the North, but also in the industrial sectors of the South. History has proven and events are proving today that, in any case, the Negroes are the decisive revolutionary force in the South.

The alienation of the white masses from the Negroes, the fostering of enmity between the two, has always been the prerequisite for maintaining the subjugation of the Negro people and, consequently, the very low standard of living of the white toilers in the South. It has been chiefly on the issue of maintaining a "solid white front" against the Negroes, together with certain recompenses granted the "poor whites" in the form of privileges, which are denied the Negroes, that the white ruling class has been able to maintain its domination over the white masses.

The revolutionary Reconstruction governments fell only after the former slaveowners had succeeded in splitting the whites from the Republican Party and attaching them to themselves on the issue of defeating "Negro domination." The farm revolts of the

90's were appeased in the South by a whole series of legal discriminations against Negroes culminating in the new state constitutions of 1900-1901, which replaced those of the revolutionary Reconstruction days, and granted the white masses those democratic rights which were by the same act being legally denied the Negroes. Since then there has been no serious break in this "white superiority" front, notwithstanding the mass migration of over a million Negroes to the North between 1917 and 1924.

The Scottsboro struggle gathering its forces in the milieu of the deep world crisis, and acting in conjunction with events of a more economically basic character like the revolt of the Negro share-croppers in Tallapoosa County, Alabama, might well become the lever for a radical transformation in the attitude and actions of the white masses in the South.

Appreciating the broad scope of the Scottsboro movement, its popular mass character, we must develop it from one step to the next, drawing ever broader masses into motion, to the point where it becomes the rallying center of the struggle for Negro liberation.
