

# Struggle for Negro Civil Rights Spurred by Scottsboro Case

By JAMES S. ALLEN

When Samuel Leibowitz, formerly associated with the International Labor Defense in the Scottsboro Case, first made public announcement of his renegacy there was an immediate response from the southern ruling class. This response came in the form of a redoubled reign of terror against the Negro masses and labor organizations in the South.

Sensing what they believed to be a weakness or a split in the mass movement for the defense of the Scottsboro boys, K. K. K. bands and government forces of the Southern states set loose a series of raids on the homes of militant Negro workers, acts of violence against the Negro beatings and killings, the most ferocious of which was the well advertised and publicly planned lynching at Marianna, Fla. The terror is still running wild in the vicinity of Marianna, while the threat of terror hangs low over the whole South.

## Case Not Isolated From Broad Struggle

These acts by the southern ruling class serve to clarify two principal aspects of the Scottsboro Case which have not as yet been sufficiently appreciated. The Scottsboro case is not simply a dramatic incident of persecution, isolated from all other aspects of the oppression of the Negro people. It takes place within the same social environment which produces lynching, Jim-crowism, terror, degradation and ostracism of the Negro masses. And secondly, arising from this fact, the Scottsboro Case, because of the mass movement it has aroused, is the pivot, the central point around which the whole struggle for Negro

rights rages today. It is recognized as such by the ruling class and its responsible representatives. Thomas Knight, Jr., state prosecutor of the nine Scottsboro boys, rode to the office of Lieutenant-Governor of Alabama in the recent election on a frankly anti-Negro and anti-Communist issue. A number of southern governors were elected on a heavily weighted "white-superiority" platform. The resurgence of the K. K. K. and other terrorist organizations in the South is directed against those masses who, inspired by the Scottsboro mass fight and given a program by it, are struggling against mass evictions on the countryside, the relief cuts which have resulted in practically no relief, and other onslaughts upon the living conditions of white and Negro toilers. Needless to add, the Scottsboro Case has been the principal foundation for a growing rebellion of the Negro masses in the North as well.

## Fight Against Lynching

If the fight for the release of the Scottsboro boys has not been sufficiently and quickly enough broadened to engulf larger masses in the struggle and to include other issues of civil rights, we have ourselves partly to blame. Everyone knows that at the present moment the Negro masses throughout the country are greatly aroused by the rapidly multiplying persecutions and attacks. The struggle against lynching and for civil rights is a most pressing issue with them. The recent picketing of the National Conference against Crime in Washington by Negro students and teachers, usually so reticent when it comes to public action of this kind,

to demand action against lynching indicates how deeply all sections of the Negro masses are moved. It is on the basis of this vital interest that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People together with a number of middle class and liberal organizations is carrying on a campaign for the Wagner-Costigan Anti-Lynching Bill, holding mass meetings, carrying on a petition drive, etc. Although the N. A. A. C. P. lost much of its prestige among the Negro masses because of its Uncle Tom role in the Scottsboro and Crawford Cases, it now stands good chances of regaining at least some of this prestige at the expense of the militant and revolutionary movement.

## N. A. A. C. P. Reformism

This does not mean that the N. A. A. C. P. has lost its Uncle Tomism. The Anti-Lynching Bill it supports and attempts to get the masses to support is essentially a measure to "save the face" of the Roosevelt Administration, which despite all its beautiful promises, has not only done nothing to stop lynching but has intensified those conditions, such as the differential wage of the codes, which give rise to it. It is sufficient to point to two main conditions of the Wagner-Costigan Bill to show that in itself, other things being favorable (such as the willingness of the federal government to stop lynching), it is not and cannot serve as an anti-lynching weapon.

In the first place, the death penalty is only conditional: it sets the penalty for lynchers at from 20 years imprisonment to death, leaving it entirely to a jury in a southern state to decide which it

shall be, taking for granted, first, that the guilty are arrested and second that such a jury finds them guilty.) In the second place, lynching is treated "by definition," not as a reality. The Bill says not a word about the conditions which give rise to lynching, nothing at all about the whole series of persecutions and discriminations which are of the same, although less violent, order as lynching.

But even more important is the whole manner in which the N. A. A. C. P. and other supporters of the Bill would have the masses believe that an anti-lynching bill can be enforced. The illusion is created and spread that by winning over a few congressmen and by holding a few conferences with church and liberal groups the Bill can be forced through a "New Deal" Congress and be put into life. With Roosevelt in such serious need for a liberal cloak with which to cover mass pauperization especially in the South and under the pressure of wide protest against such lynchings as at Marianna, there is some possibility of such a bill being passed by the next Congress. But this would simply be a gesture, another statute to be listed in the morgue with the Civil War amendments.

## Methods of Anti-Lynch Bill

Whether an effective bill against lynching is passed and enforced depends primarily upon the manner in which it is forced upon a federal congress. If the passage of an effective bill comes as a result of a nation-wide mass movement in which the masses are fully aware of their own role in forcing it through, then there is a basis for its enforcement. For it comes as a result of

mass pressure, organized and aware of the pitfalls of constitutional illusions and ready to demand and fight for its enforcement at the first opportunity. But this means rousing and organizing a mass movement, sweeping broad masses of both whites and Negroes into it. This is something neither Wagner, Costigan nor the N. A. A. C. P. desires.

It remains for us to do it. The already large Scottsboro defense movement is the starting point for such a campaign, for it is already aware of everything that has to be done and is already involved in a struggle for civil rights. We also have a bill, clear of the illusions which the N. A. A. C. P.-supported bill fosters. It is the Civil Rights Bill, a draft of which was already presented to President Roosevelt by the Scottsboro March to Washington after the first Decatur trial. As its name implies, this Bill presents clearly the connection between lynching and the general oppression of the Negro masses and raises all the social issues so keenly felt by the Negro masses today. It provides the death penalty for lynchers. It is the instrument around which the whole Negro people will rally once it is properly presented and explained.

## Fight For Civil Rights

But we have not yet taken up this task with the energy it deserves. This is the present necessary task not only in connection with the Scottsboro case but also with regard to the fight for Negro rights. We stand in danger of tripping on the next step in extending the Negro liberation movement unless a broad

mass campaign, having at its center the struggle for the Civil Rights Bill, is immediately set into motion.

As already shown in Cleveland, where the City Council was forced to pass an anti-discrimination statute as the result of a movement initiated by the League of Struggle for Negro Rights and the I. L. D. after Mrs. Wright, one of the Scottsboro mothers, had been refused service in a local restaurant, immediate and local struggles for Negro rights can serve as the lever for developing a nation-wide mass campaign for the Civil Rights Bill. A strenuous struggle against discrimination in the unions should be the basis for involving trade unionists in the campaign. The Bill must be brought before trade union bodies, fraternal organizations, lodges, churches, etc., for official action. On the basis of local struggles and affiliations the force can be created which can bring about the passage of the Bill as the victory of the mass movement.

— Cleveland

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