

## Our Oppressed Nation

*THE NEGRO QUESTION IN THE UNITED STATES*, by James S. Allen. International Publishers. New York. Popular edition. \$1.25.

HERE, at last, is a book on the Negro question which gets down to essentials. Many people will disagree with the conclusions. But they cannot evade the key problems which James S. Allen in his book has clearly defined as the basis for any serious and scientific discussion of the Negro question in this country.

Around no other major problem facing the American people have there hung, so long, such thick clouds of prejudice and confused ideas—hoary errors which have been accepted as gospel truth. Allen has done the wise thing. Instead of beginning with a discussion of common and "scientific" prejudices, which have so often served as the point of departure for writers on the Negro, he starts at the root of the problem; he gives a clear presentation of the real economic and social basis for both the oppression of the Negro and the superstructure of false ideas which has grown up around him. That is, perhaps, the greatest contribution the book has to offer.

Radical writers, sympathetic to the Negro, are often satisfied with an all too simple formula. Most of the Negroes are workers, they say, and their problem is therefore essentially a labor problem. Capitalism has nurtured prejudice between black and white labor. This prejudice must be overcome, the white and Negro workers must get together and together solve the problems of labor. For decades this has been the philosophy that permeated the advanced labor movement and for decades the official labor movement has been practically white. We hold no brief against a constant and persistent struggle against white chauvinism in the labor movement and elsewhere, but this in itself will not accomplish the desired end. Something more is needed: a clear and common understanding that the problems of the Negro extend beyond the limits of the "labor problem," that his most immediate needs are those of a people oppressed by another and more powerful nation.

This is the thesis of Allen's book. And he proves it conclusively by analyzing the economic and social structure of American society, particularly in the South. He supplies a much-needed analysis of the plantation system and the forms of tenancy which are peculiar to the South and which are reminiscent of a feudal slave society. He does not ask the reader to take his word for it. He shows, on the basis of first-hand statistical and economic data, that the plantation holds the dominant position in the agrarian economy of the deep South; that share-cropping and share-tenancy, the forms of labor which most closely approximate feudal forms, are most developed and most highly concentrated on the landed estates; and that these powerful re-

mainders of the chattel slave system have also affected the white non-plantation area. Share-cropping and share-tenancy on the plantation are defined not as merely tenancy, which has been the usually accepted definition, but as a transitional form of labor between chattel slavery and other wage labor or capitalist farm tenancy.

A distinction is made between white and Negro tenancy in the South which is of decisive importance. The first difference is historical: Negro share-cropping and tenancy developed out of chattel slavery when the revolution inaugurated by the Civil War failed to give land to the freedmen, while white cropping and tenancy resulted from the expropriation of the small landowners by finance capital. This leads to another difference: most of the Negro croppers and tenants are to be found on the plantations, while most of the whites are in the non-plantation belts or on small tenant farms in the Black Belt counties. This distinction is important because, besides indicating a real difference in the problems of the white and Negro tenants, it shows that the agrarian survivals of the chattel slave plantation system affect the Negro tillers of the soil most drastically and most directly.

Allen's analysis of the agrarian system in the South is a marked contribution, in the first place, to a clearer conception of the nature and contradictions of American society. Our country is shown to be not that "pure" capitalist country unmarred by the remnants of a dark past which has so often been held up as a true picture. Instead, it bears the ugly and very perceptible imprint of the chattel slavery which almost every day bursts forth into a lynching or some equal brutality against the Negro. Not the remembrance but the real, practical remainders of the old slave system, in the form of the plantation and share-cropping, largely account for the oppression and persecution of the Negro. The plantation South serves as the basis for the anti-Negro South, which sends forth a stench poisoning the whole country.

The plantation belt, the book proves with maps and statistics, is at the same time the area of Negro majority. This was true over a long historical period. The expansion of the plantation and the spread of Negro slavery were a part of the same process. Today, more than seventy years after Emancipation, the plantation area is still the Black Belt. The slave plantation belt of 1860 is the Black Belt of 1936. What fact could more tellingly summarize the fundamental situation with regard to the Negro!

In succeeding chapters, the author traces the effects of southern semi-slavery upon the country as a whole and upon the development of the Negro people. Through the southern credit system, finance capital became the real overlord of the plantation. A study of the effects of the crisis and the Roosevelt agrarian

policy reveals that this had the effect of bolstering the plantation system at the expense of the small farmers. The chapter on industrialization of the South proves that the plantation determined the location, nature and labor supply of industry at the expense of the Negro. The section on Northern industry defines the progressive features of the mass exodus of Negroes from the South which hastened the growth of a Negro proletariat, but which did not at the same time cause any permanent decline of the plantation. Industrialization as a whole, the author concludes, was not accompanied by any fundamental agrarian transformation in the South as was the case in older capitalist countries. It contributed to such a transformation only to the extent that it did create a Negro working class and a centralized white proletariat especially in the Birmingham area. The retardation of the Negro people by Wall Street imperialism also prevented the growth of any important industrial bourgeoisie among the Negroes and restricted Negro business to an impoverished and segregated market.

The burden of the whole analysis is to prove, more completely and conclusively than has yet been done, that the Negroes are an oppressed nation, which has been hindered by forces outside its control from free and unhampered evolution as a people. This once established, the major premise has been won.

In his two concluding chapters, Allen explains the Communist program with regard to oppressed nations generally and the Negro in particular. He shows that all the circumstances are present for the ultimate solution of the Negro question along the lines of self-determination. Here again the author approaches the question in a most convincing manner. He shows that the right of self-determination sums up the concept of equal rights for Negroes when applied realistically to the South, and is the culmination of a whole revolutionary process involving the destruction of the plantation economy and the establishment of popular democracy in its fully worked out form. In a very clear sum-

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mation chapter, the author takes up systematically the various objections which have been raised in different circles against the Communist program.

The purpose of the book, as Allen says in his introduction, is to provide a framework of analysis and ultimate solution which will hold together and give shape to practical tasks as they develop from day to day. For my part, I should have liked a more extended treatment of immediate tasks and problems

and more discussion of some of the pertinent issues that arise in the creation of a Negro people's front, such as the National Negro Congress, and in building a Farmer-Labor Party. But Allen has shown the basis for this immediate program and has made a valuable contribution to the literature on the Negro. After all, there is a limit to what one can justly demand in a book which has performed its principal task so well.

JAMES W. FORD.