

Body Wracked, Head Unbowed, Angelo Herndon Asks News of Workers' Struggles and Soviet Union

Heroic Negro Organizer Confident Workers Will Free Him

By MYRA PAGE

THE sombre walls of Fulton County walls of Fulton County Prison, where Angelo Herndon is entombed, rise in the very heart of Atlanta, "cultural center of the South." The jail doorbell jangles several minutes before the jailer bestirs himself from his comfortable chew and gossiping with a bluecoat, to let us in. We spy him eyeing us idly through a griled window, like some slow-witted Bossie behind a barbed-wire fence.

The heavy door swings back. He takes us into his office. My companion, member of a well known Atlanta law firm whom the International Labor Defense has just interested in the case, produces his card. The jailer's waddling person exudes an ingratiating importance. And what may he do for us?

"We came to see a prisoner—Angelo Herndon."

The keeper's jaw sags. "That gold dern nigger! You come to see him!" Perplexed fear in his eyes, his bearing resumes its old hardness. He surveys me and I him, with mutual contempt. To think that this biped has in his keeping that rare spirit and working class fighter, Angelo Herndon!

He may manhandle and insult as he likes our young comrade, sentenced to 20 years on the chain-gang for having organized Atlanta's jobless in a march to the Fulton County Commission to demand relief. This alone has been his "crime."

Herndon's Militant Defiance Infuriated Slave Drivers

What had most infuriated the Coca Cola and mill and cotton interests controlling Georgia was his defiance of Jim Crow. That "damned white nigger" had dared organize unemployed councils and demonstrations that included both colored and white. This was open rebellion! Inciting to riot!

The orderly demonstrators won their demands. The Commission found an extra \$6,000 for relief. (But get that Red!) Some days later, as he was entering the post office for his mail, Angelo was arrested. For 11 days he remained without any charges placed against him. Meanwhile he was treated to trips to the electrocution cell and similar diversions, "to make the bastard talk." Terror proved useless.

Old Slave Law Dug Up

Finally the Red-baiting Solicitor Hudson bethought himself of an old law directed against rebelling slaves, and resurrected in recent years for the rebelling workers. So in the summer of 1932, Angelo Herndon was charged under a law dating back to 1820, "for inciting to insurrection." The penalty was death.

"For six months before I was tried," the 19-year-old organizer writes, "I was forced to live in a cell with condemned men. I almost died from starvation and lack of medicine." After three days of a farcical trial, he was found guilty. But the wide protest roused by the I.L.D. caused the jury to "recom-

mend mercy." Sentence was from 18 to 20 years on the Georgia chain gang. Jack Spivak in his book, "Georgia Nigger," showed what a torturous death-trap these gangs are.

The jailer shoots a stream of "baccy" into the spittoon. "That gold dern nigger! The one I get all them telegrams about—demanding I release him. Imagine that! Demanding!" At my involuntary grin, (Comrades, let's send more and more!), the keeper's fury pulls him to his feet. "That blasted coon! Oughta be on the chain gang, that's what. Where I'd put him too." (Yes, but for those wires!)

Not Visiting Day "For Niggers"

Remembering the lawyer's quite wide connections, our host jingles his keys. His bearing modifies. "What you mixing up in such a case for?" he queries, adding quickly, "Come on. This ain't visiting day for niggers, but seeing as it's you, Mr. Langley."

His gulf waddle precedes us to a high steel door, one side of a barred cage. Within are penned human beings. In the half-light, at square peepholes stand bedraggled white men, receiving their families. On the outside, staring through the bars at their father are three small children with their worn mother. Their faces, and the man's are wet, stricken. He is a "Poor White," tenant farmer or millhand. Nothing cruel in his face. However, he may have broken the rich man's law, it is clear that poverty has been his main crime.

The jailer pushes the woman and children aside, unlocks the door. We pass through, and the door clanks to behind us. Beyond another steel door, in a cage further removed from sun and air are the colored prisoners. The Jim Crow system is very strictly enforced here; white men, be they thieves, murderers or dope addicts, are still "superior" to any Negro. So the Georgia state law rules.

From the narrow stone floor stagger tier on tier of musty cramped cells. This damp shaftway is like those in an East side tenement, only the stench is worse. It is high noon outside: here the gloom seeps to your very bones. The tomb of the living dead.

In a nasty key, the jailer draws to a keeper. "Bring that nigger Herndon down here." The cry echoes up the tiers. "Herndon!" Somewhere a key clicks, a barred door is thrown back. He starts down the tiers, this son of an Alabama coal-digger who began work in the mines too as a lad of 13. I recall the simple terse words in which he recorded his first acquaintance with the revolutionary movement.

How Herndon Joined Revolutionary Movement

"One day a friend and I, in search of work, happened to come across some handbills stuck to a post. We snatched one off. We did not take time to read it right then. After looking over Birmingham for work, we set out for home. I took the handbill out of my pocket. I saw the startling headline, 'Would you rather fight



MYRA PAGE

—or starve?" I called my friend. We both sat down and began to read the handbill. Near the bottom was the announcement of a meeting called for 3 o'clock in the heart of the town by the Unemployed Council. All the way there I said to myself, 'It's war. It's war. So I might as well get into it now as any other time.'

The Negro youth finds white and colored workers uniting—something new in the South. His friend is afraid, but Angelo joins, goes to his first demonstration. When the National Unemployed Convention is held in 1930 in Chicago, he is elected a delegate. The Kluxers distribute threatening handbills, stage night-shirt parades. Angelo's relatives try to persuade him from going to the convention for fear their home will be bombed by the Klan. He goes anyway—and returns to begin organization work among the miners. The big T.C.I. corporation orders his arrest. So at 17, he is handcuffed to a white organizer and comrade, and thrown in jail. They are charged with vagrancy, sentenced to a year's hard labor on the chain gang—but the I.L.D. has them acquitted.

Arrested Many Times for His Activities

Arrested several times after that for organizing the miners and unemployed, he is sent into the Black Belt to organize the sharecroppers, and barely escapes a lynch mob. He is active in the Scottsboro campaign, the Dred Scott case of the Negro people in the South. The Birmingham underworld tries to frame him in connection with the Willie Peterson frame-up, but fail. Herndon, sent to Atlanta to organize the unemployed, although barely 19, is already schooled in the fight, and able to meet whatever comes. Herndon Appears! Eyes Unafraid, Spirit Unbroken

The steps grow nearer. Down the jail stairs comes a slight, upright figure in a white shirt and tan trousers. There is no mistaking; his eyes are unafraid.

Not even Fulton Prison can break a revolutionist.

The jailer glares his hate. "Visitors!" He thumbs at us. The youth crosses over, a slow, modest smile lighting his face. Visitors are rare, and our call unexpected. I see my lawyer friend's amazement. New to

Jailer Scowls as White Woman Shakes Hands with Famous Prisoner

the case, he has not seen Angelo Herndon before. In all this fifth, that lad has kept himself clean as a whistle, inside and out. "You're right," he whispers hurriedly, "he just doesn't belong here."

We introduce ourselves: Angelo Herndon puts out his hand. "Hello, comrade!" The words ring through the gloom. We shake hands; the jailer glowers. "What kinda monkey business is this," he fumes to the lawyer, "a white woman calling on and shaking hands with a nigger!" Herndon Speaks of Dimitroff, Asks News of U.S.S.R.

We hear him, and shake again. Barely a quarter of an hour we're allowed; we have to talk fast. He speaks, not of himself, but of his joy that Dimitroff is free. He is eager to hear more news of the movement, the Soviet Union. In his pocket is a "Daily Worker"; he is so eager to enter as much as he can into things, even from his cell, to be a part. He is sure that the American workers will soon set him free. So am I. But Angelo Herndon has been waiting now, two years. His case has been appealed to the Georgia Supreme Court. Since last October he has waited for a decision. Workers, unions, mass organizations, will you raise such a protest that the Judges must grant a new trial, and Angelo Herndon be set free?

For the message I bring from our comrade in Fulton Prison is grave, urgent. True, no terror or imprisonment can break our young comrade's spirit. But they may break his body. In a nine-by-twelve-foot cell they have kept him penned up with four other prisoners, condemned men. He has been forced to listen, night after night, to their bitter cries. Although wracking to a sensitive nature like Herndon's, if they thought by this to break his morale, they have failed. But it is not easy. We must see that he is immediately accorded the rights of a political prisoner, until set free.

Waiting for Workers to Set Him Free

Suffering from the terrific food and air, Angelo has only escaped serious illness through the extra food supplied him by the I.L.D. He was examined recently by two prison doctors, one white and one Negro. The white doctor actually made no examination but lectured our comrade on "bein' a bad nigger. Stop givin' out these statements," etc. But the Negro doctor did examine him. He reported that Angelo Herndon is threatened with tuberculosis, and requires sunshine, fresh air, special food. Also his eyesight is extremely bad. An immediate change is urgent.

Of all this, Angelo says little, except as I question him. But as the jailer demands we leave, we see Angelo standing there in the gloom, waiting. Waiting to be set free, to come back to his comrades and place in the ranks. Surely he shall not wait long, or in vain!