

Lessons of Scottsboro

By Doxey Wilkerson

"The Scottsboro boys shall not die!" This stirring battle-cry of the past decade set hundreds of thousands of men and women into motion, and demonstrated the power of united mass action.



As our nation and the world contemplate the new vistas of democratic freedom opened up by the historic agreements of Tehran, it is no irrelevance that the goals of the Scottsboro Case now move forward again—still closer to their final achievement. On Jan. 6, two more of the Scottsboro boys were freed!

Last week's action by the Alabama Board of Pardons does more than highlight the tremendous victory over reaction in this case. Coming now, at the high point of progressive unity thus far reached in this people's war of liberation, it symbolized the still greater triumphs of the democratic forces of the people in the new era of world and domestic relationships which lies immediately ahead.

In the spring of 1931, the Southern Bourbons were confronted with a deepening economic crisis which gave rise to alarming unrest among the white and Negro masses whom they ruled. They sorely needed some dramatic incident to relieve the tension of the white masses, and at the same time to put the Negroes back in their "place." Nine Negro youths pulled from a freight train provided what they thought was the answer to their needs.

Trumped-up "rape" charges were placed against the nine boys. The already developing mob spirit was hastened by calling out the militia. Lynch-trials were held in Scottsboro, while the crowd outside sang: "There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight." Within four days, eight of the boys (all but the 13-year-old, in whose case the jury disagreed) were found guilty and convicted. Death sentences were imposed.

'LEGAL' LYNCHING

The stage was now all set for a mass "legal" lynching. The boys would be ceremoniously killed. Their case would be cited to the world as "evidence" of the bestial nature of the Negro people, as "justification" for their further oppression. The growing unrest of the white masses (who already had been thoroughly poisoned by the virus of race hate) would now be directed to the brutal and whole-

sale persecution of the Negro people. The threat to the rule of Southern Bourbons would be relieved.

But then, something unexpected happened. Spear-headed by the International Labor Defense (and later, by the joint Scottsboro Defense Committee), the democratic masses began to move. Protest parades and other demonstrations were held, not only in Harlem and other American communities, but throughout the civilized world. Floods of letters and telegrams poured in upon the Governor of Alabama.

Buttressed by these protests of the people, expert legal counsel used every device to prevent the planned murder of the Scottsboro boys. Trials and re-trials extended over a period of six years. Time and again, the ILD attorneys appealed to the Alabama Supreme Court—and lost; twice to the U. S. Supreme Court—and won. (Two subsequent appeals were turned down. Alabama courts had learned to "follow the rules.") During recent years, after the dramatic mass protests had subsided and all recourse to the courts had been exhausted, the Scottsboro Defense Committee persisted with its unceasing negotiations for the freedom of the boys.

What are the results of this 13-year (and continuing) struggle? What lessons does it teach?

First, seven of the nine Scottsboro boys are free. Charges against four were dropped in 1937; Charlie Weems was paroled last Nov. 18; and Clarence Norris and Andy Wright were paroled last week. Haywood Patterson and Ozle Powell are still in prison—but they, too, shall be free.

OUTRAGEOUS PLAN

Second, the Negro people and the nation were saved from that wholesale reversion to terrorization and mass persecution which the Scottsboro case was designed to initiate. In the face of overwhelming and world-wide mass protests of the people, even the rules of the South

did not dare to carry through their outrageous plan.

Third, two basic civil rights were firmly established for the Negro people as a result of ILD appeals to the U. S. Supreme Court: (1) the right to serve on juries, and (2) the right to counsel of one's own choosing. The first of these principles has served as a valid precedent for hundreds of subsequent cases in the legal defense of Negro rights.

FEW HAD FAITH

The Scottsboro case demonstrates, once again, that no democratic goal—however remote it may seem—is beyond the power of the people to achieve. In the dark days of 1931, few had faith when the Communist Party raised the slogan: "The Scottsboro boys shall not die!" The Daily Worker, now justly celebrating 20 years of valiant and effective service to the people, then seemed like a forlorn voice in the wilderness.

But these staunchest fighters for the freedom of the Scottsboro boys played well their role as the vanguard of a people who little realized their own power. In time they came to believe, and then, in unity, to act. The Scottsboro boys did not die.

The task is not yet complete. The thousands of boys must still be relieved of restrictions upon their participation in civilian life. The two boys still in prison must be freed. And they shall!

But more than this: The Negro people as a whole must still be freed from the shackles of Jim Crowism. They and the overwhelming masses of freedom-loving peoples of our nation and the world must be united in the struggle for that victory and that just and durable peace which are the promise of Tehran.

In this larger struggle, too, the Communist Party and The Daily Worker—now far more mature and strong than in the early days of Scottsboro—will prove to be the staunchest fighters for freedom. In this struggle, too, the democratic power of the people shall triumph.



"A STAMP A DAY
FOR THE MAN
WHO IS AWAY"

