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LYNCHING

by
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LYNCHING

A WEAPON OF NATIONAL OPPRESSION

BY HARRY HAYWOOD AND MILTON HOWARD

More than 500 persons stood by and looked on while the Negro was slowly burned to a crisp. A few women were scattered among the crowd of Arkansas planters. . . .

Not once did the slayer beg for mercy despite the fact that he suffered one of the most horrible deaths imaginable. With the Negro chained to a log, members of the mob placed a small pile of leaves around his feet. Gasoline was then poured on the leaves and the carrying out of the death sentence was under way. . . .

As the flames were eating away his abdomen, a member of the mob stepped forward and saturated the body with gasoline. It was then only a few minutes until the Negro had been reduced to ashes. . . .

—*Memphis Press*, Jan. 27, 1921.

THIS is how an eye witness described the lynching of Henry Lowry.

Who was Lowry? What was his crime? Henry Lowry was a Negro share-cropper in Nodena, Arkansas. For two years he had been toiling steadily under the scorching sun. Yet for two years he had not received one cent of his rightful wages. The landlord had advanced him less and less food for his family. Already they were close to starvation.

He went to the landlord's house and demanded wages. The landlord at first looked at him queerly, as if he did not understand what he had heard. But when he understood that one of "his" share-croppers, was actually asking for his wages, he rose in insane fury, cursing and beating Lowry with his gun. Then he leveled his revolver at Lowry's head, and fired, wounding him. Enraged at this dog-like treatment, Lowry *began to fight back*. In the fight the landlord was killed.

As soon as this became known, the white landlords for miles around became obsessed with one idea—to torture and lynch this Negro share-cropper, to murder him, so that not another Negro worker on the plantation, not one of their own starving tenants would dare to protest, as Lowry had done, against the brutal exploitation of the landlords.

To refuse to starve, to refuse to be robbed. These were the terrible “crimes” for which Lowry, Negro farm worker, was burned at the stake—lynched by the landlords and their henchmen. This is how the white ruling class attempts to subdue any opposition to its merciless exploitation of the Negro people.

The Ruling Class Takes Its Toll

In their efforts to subdue the Negro workers and peasants, the ruling class has taken a terrible toll. Since 1882, the first year in which any attempt was made to gather statistics on lynching, over 4,000 Negroes have been either hanged, burned, or both. Of these over 75 were women; some of the victims were young girls less than 15 years of age.

Here are only a few recent cases:

George Johnson, in May, 1930, accused his landlord of falsifying debt accounts. Struggling in self-defense he killed the landlord. He was lynched, and his body was dragged through the Negro quarter and burned in front of a Negro church.

John Parker, unemployed and starving Negro worker of Conway, Arkansas, was accused of stealing some peaches. He was lynched by plantation owners, August, 1931.

Bill Fane was a Negro worker who refused to toil without pay. He was lynched by a mob of merchants and planters in September, 1931.

Will Jones and his family of five were shot down in cold blood by a landlord and his henchmen in October, 1931. The landlord said that in a dispute over wages, “Jones talked back.”

Dave Tillis of Crockett, Texas, demanded an accounting from his landlord. He was seized and charged with “entering the bed-

room of a white woman." He was lynched by his landlord and four neighboring landowners, April, 1932.

Every one of these Negro workers was murdered as a direct result of the class struggle as expressed in his demand for wages or better conditions from the white landlords *who exploit the Negro masses with even greater intensity than they rob the white workers*. Other lynchings result from the refusal of a militant Negro worker or peasant to submit to every kind of social abuse and persecution. The lynchers themselves have admitted as some of the reasons for lynching, the following: trying to vote, accusing a white man of stealing, testifying against white men, being too successful, talking back to a white man.

Such "leaders" of the Negro people as Walter White, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.), and such "friends" of the Negro people as the upper class "educated" (as W. E. B. DuBois calls them) whites in the Interracial Commission have ascribed the savagery and brutality of lynching to the drabness of Southern life, to the desire for amusement and entertainment by "poor whites who have no radios and do not go to movies." This is but a dastardly evasion of the real cause of lynching and the desertion of the fight against lynching. It is the traditional policy of these "race leaders" and their white friends to preserve the present system of capitalism, with its segregation and lynching, by making the Negro workers and poor farmers believe that white workers are their enemies, and the "educated" white men (the bosses) their friends.

Brutality and savagery mark all lynchings. Young and old, male and female, have been tortured by fire; a pregnant colored woman was hanged by the ankles and her unborn child ripped from her abdomen. This ruling class savagery has a purpose: to strike terror into the hearts of the oppressed Negro people so that they dare not strike out for liberation.

What is the Real Cause and Purpose of Lynching?

Every lynching, every degradation, every social persecution and proscription, every Jim Crow humiliation, which the Negro masses

suffer in this country is the result of the fact that the Negro millions are in the position of an oppressed nationality. They are subjected to a more intense, a fiercer exploitation on the land and in the factories. While the white workers are miserably exploited by the capitalist robbers, the Negro workers are especially exploited and persecuted. They are super-exploited. They are given the dirtiest jobs, the longest hours, and the least pay. They are the last to be hired and the first to be fired. They must work under the foulest conditions. It is an absolutely undeniable fact that today, nearly 70 years after they were supposed to be "freed," *the Negro masses are in slavery, producing super-profits for their capitalist landlords and bosses.*

Concentrated on the land in the Black Belt,* more than three-quarters of the nine and a half million Negroes in the South live in indescribable poverty, crushed by debts and starvation. Every year, after the "settlement" with the landlord, hundreds of thousands of Negro croppers, penniless and owning no land, find that they are toiling hopelessly in peonage, chained to the landlord by debts which no toil can wipe out.

The only way that the capitalist class can preserve this extra exploitation of the Negro masses is to keep them an isolated, degraded group, subject to special persecution. For this they have created a hideous system of social persecution and Jim Crow segregation against the Negro masses, forcing them to live in squalid Jim Crow ghettos. They teach the white workers and their children that whites are "superior" to Negroes. This is the typical method used by a powerful capitalist country to drive a wedge between "its own" workers and the workers of the oppressed nation. This serves a double purpose. It cripples the resistance of the oppressed nationality by isolating it. And it blinds the "superior" workers to the fact that they are being robbed by the same capitalists as the "inferior" workers.

Here we come to the true origin and purpose of lynching. It is with the aid of such methods as lynching, terrorism and violence that this whole system of national oppression, super-exploitation and social persecution can be enforced. And the greatest victory

* See *The American Negro*, by J. S. Allen, International Pamphlets, No. 18.

for the capitalist rulers is to get white workers to be the agents of their campaign of terrorism. Lynchings defend profits! Lynchings are a warning to the Negro toilers. Lynching is one of the weapons with which the white ruling class enforces its national oppression of the Negro people, and tries to maintain division between the white workers and the Negro toilers.

The "Rape" Lie

To incite the white workers against the Negroes and to further build the myth of "white superiority," the white ruling class has coined the poisonous and insane lie that Negroes are "rapists." Today, American imperialism is using this same "rape" lie against the masses of Hawaii as it proceeds to place this important naval base under iron rule in preparation for war against the Chinese people and the Soviet Union. In defending the white lynchers of Hawaii, Clarence Darrow, of the Board of Directors of the N.A.A.C.P., aided in this war preparation and in spreading the "rape" lie.

It is only necessary to remember a few facts to see the utter falsity of this ruling class slander.

The first fact is that of the 2,522 Negroes lynched during the period 1889-1918, only 19%, or one in five victims, were even *charged* with rape. When we remember that this charge is invoked whenever possible as the traditional excuse for every kind of murder, the fact that the lynchers themselves could only *charge* 19% of their victims with "rape" reveals how base is the lynchers' lie that they murder Negro workers to "protect white womanhood." As in the above-mentioned case of Dave Tillis, who was lynched for demanding an accounting from his landlord, the cry of "rape" is raised whenever any Negro worker begins to rise from his knees. We may be certain that of the Negro workers lynched for "rape," practically none, if any, were guilty of a crime committed innumerable times by whites against Negro women, and punished, if ever at all, by a few months in jail.

The second fact even more incisively than the first, tears the "rape" lie to pieces. Whenever the reader hears the cry of "rape"

to justify the lynching of a Negro worker, let him but call to mind this profoundly illuminating historical fact: that Negroes have been in this country for three hundred years; that during the first 200 years not one was ever accused of "rape," though hundreds of thousands of Negro workers lived in the closest proximity to the whites. For 200 years, for eight generations, not the slightest hint about the Negroes as "rapists." The first time we hear this lie is about the year 1830, two hundred years after the Negroes were first unloaded from the slave ships in Virginia. Why did it appear at this time? *Because this year marks the beginning of the abolition movement in the North, and the sharpening struggle of the slaves themselves for freedom.* For 200 years the Negro workers were not "rapists." But as soon as their position as valuable slaves was endangered, then they suddenly became "rapists."

In the last 50 years, 76 Negro women were lynched, some with bestial cruelty. Were they, too, "rapists"?

The Southern landlords and their henchmen consider all Negro women as legitimate prey. Many Negroes have died for objecting to the rape of Negro girls and women by whites. Mrs. Wise was lynched at Frankfort, Virginia, May, 1931, for objecting to her daughter's being taken out for "rides" by white Klansmen. Clyde Payne was murdered in Florida, September, 1931, by the employer of his wife, when he tried to protect her from attack. In Georgia, an aged Negro was lynched for trying to prevent the rape of two colored girls by two white men.

Many whites take advantage of the capitalist "rape" lie to protect themselves. In New Jersey, in 1927, a man was killed while riding in an automobile with his wife. She told the police that two Negroes had murdered him as he tried to protect her from rape. Under cross examination it was brought out that she and her lover had committed the crime. In Philadelphia, in 1930, a 17-year-old girl stayed out all night with her companions. Next morning she reported she had been abducted and assaulted by two Negroes. Pressed by questioners, she confessed that she had invented this story to deceive her mother. In Norfolk, Virginia, November, 1930, a white woman, struggling with a "black" assailant, tore open his shirt and discovered that he was a white man

who had blackened his face and hands. There are scores of such "cork-face" crimes. No one can tell how many innocent Negroes have been burned and hanged as a result of such frame-ups.

Who Organizes Lynchings?

The impression is purposely created by ruling class propaganda, and nurtured by "race leaders" of the N.A.A.C.P. and Kelly Miller type, that lynchings are the deeds of "irresponsible mobs" or the "lawless elements." Nothing could be further from the truth. An examination of the facts of many hundreds of lynchings shows what every lyncher knows full well—that every lynching is a carefully organized and thoroughly planned murder, done with the full cooperation of every ruling class agency, the police, the sheriffs, the militia, the newspapers, the entire government apparatus. Without the active leadership of the "best elements," that is, the rich and powerful landlords and bosses, without the tacit or active participation of the government and its officers, lynchings could never take place.

Here are only a few facts taken from literally thousands of similar cases. When George Hughes was horribly roasted alive in his prison cell, in 1930, at Sherman, Texas, the Governor forbade the sheriff to fire on the lynch gang, thus guaranteeing that the lynching would take place.

When John Hatfield, Negro worker, was seized by a lynch gang at Ellisville, Mississippi, the biggest newspaper in the state, the *Jackson Daily News*, carried headlines announcing the exact time and place of the coming orgy. Ten thousand people answered the paper's invitation and *they were addressed by the District Attorney, T. W. Wilson, while the lynching was going on.*

At Marion, Indiana, in August 1930, a lynch gang announced its intention of lynching two Negro boys who were locked up in the jail. When the mob arrived there they found the jail and cell doors wide open, the state prison authorities giving their fullest cooperation to the lynchers.

When Matt Williams was seized in Salisbury, Maryland, De-

ember, 1931, from the non-resisting hospital authorities, the sheriff and district attorney suddenly left town. And while the hideous torture was going on in one of the most crowded sections of the city, *the police were directing traffic so that the lynching would not be interrupted!*

The State and Federal Governments as "Protectors"

But the state and federal government will be a much better protection for the Negro workers, say the liberals and the Negro bourgeois "race leaders." Let us see.

When Raymond Gunn was burned at Maryville, Missouri, in 1931, the National Guard was present during the entire lynching. The officer in charge reported that his instructions were to act only upon request from the sheriff. And since the sheriff refused to request his services, he and his regiment watched the lynching without lifting a finger.

In October, 1930, a National Guard unit was ordered to Darien, Georgia, to prevent the lynching of George Grant. But the lynch gang had no difficulty in seizing the Negro and lynching him. This commander, Colonel Neal, made a report in which he said that the guard had done its duty. He had sent *one soldier*, to guard the prisoner. The Negro was seized by the gang which entered the *unguarded rear door*. The sheriff said, "I don't know who killed the nigger and I don't give a damn." Governor Hardman of Georgia would not read the report of one of the state officials who reported these facts. He was entirely satisfied with the course of events.

The National Guard was sent to "protect" the Scottsboro boys, April, 1931, so that they could be legally lynched "with due process of law." These troops gave all the boys merciless beatings while they were "guarding" them.

When militant workers attempt to struggle against wage cuts, speed-up and starvation, the whole police and army apparatus is mobilized against them. But one rarely hears of any government action against lynchers. Grand juries, coroners' juries, and

governors suddenly become strangely inactive. Hundreds of times grand juries have refused to indict any lynchers because the victim met death at the "hands of a mob, the members of which are unknown." The Governor of Mississippi accepted such a verdict in the case of Jim Ivy. Yet the town newspaper, the *News-Scimitar*, of Rocky Ford, Mississippi, carried photographs in which the faces of at least one hundred lynchers were clearly visible.

Lynchings are not the "victory of the lawless over the law." They take place not only with the complete cooperation, but in hundreds of cases, with the active participation of the whole legal and governmental machine, the sheriffs, the deputies, the district attorneys, and so forth. And this is so because the ruling class exploiters and the government are united in using lynching as a weapon in the national oppression of the Negro masses.

It is not only in the South that the Negroes are the most oppressed section of the working class. In the North, too, the Negro worker lives in Jim Crow ghettos, is forced into the worst jobs, is paid from 20 to 65% less than the miserable wages of white workers, even when he does the same work. In the North the Negroes are a minority of the population and suffer all the exploitation and added oppression of a national minority. Here, too, the bosses answer the demands of Negro workers with lynching—Matt Williams in Salisbury, Maryland; Tom Shiff and Abe Smith in Marion, Indiana; Raymond Gunn in Maryville, Missouri.

Laws Against Lynching

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People prides itself on the fact that it fights lynching by collecting signatures for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Law. We are told by both our Negro and white "friends" that lynching can be abolished by simply passing laws.

Anti-lynching laws have been passed in a number of states. Virginia has a law for the "dispersal of mobs." The only time it was used was to break up a picket line of textile strikers at

Danville. Georgia passed an anti-lynching law in 1893. It provides for one to 20 years imprisonment for any one guilty of "mobbing or lynching a citizen *without due process of law.*" This law actually provides legal protection for lynchers. *No one has ever been convicted under this law, although Georgia has had at least 600 lynchings since the law was passed.*

North Carolina has a law providing for fines against lynchers who break into jails. After the law was passed lynch gangs simply seized their victims before they could be imprisoned, and thus evaded the "law."

Some states, like West Virginia, Kentucky, Texas, Tennessee, Ohio, and Nebraska have laws which provide for the payment of damages to relatives. But since, in all these states, the grand juries and the courts refuse to act, the laws are dead letters. State anti-lynching laws have not prevented lynching. *More than 1,000 lynchings have taken place in these states since the laws were passed.*

By dangling the illusion that lynching can be stopped by such laws—even a federal one—the N.A.A.C.P. tries to divert the Negro workers from an energetic struggle against lynching. It asks them to rest their faith in those very state officials and in the very ruling class which organizes, perpetuates and defends lynch law.

Courthouse Lynchings

What can be expected from the courts and the state is shown only too clearly by the number of lynchings that have taken place under the cover of "due process of law." As in every phase of life, so in the system of justice, too, the Negro does not even get the chance that the white worker gets, as little as that may be. On the basis of the "rape" lie seven of the nine Scottsboro boys now (July, 1932) await execution in the electric chair. Only the worldwide mass protest of the international working class has saved them from the electric chair lynching and forced the Supreme Court of the United States to agree to review their case.

Two unemployed Negro workers, Robert Strickland and

Percy Irvin, are electrocuted in Alabama for *stealing 50 cents*. In the North, too, the "rape" lie is used in an effort to bring about the legal lynching of 17-year-old Willie Brown of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

What is behind all this legal lynching? The answer has been given by Governor Ross Sterling of Texas. In January of 1932, Barney Lee Ross, Negro boy, was executed after a trial which took less than two hours. In denying stay of execution the Governor said, in words which no worker, Negro or white, should ever forget:

It may be that this boy is innocent, but it is sometimes necessary to burn down a house in order to save a village.

This statement bawzenly admits two things. First, that Negro workers who "may be innocent" are being murdered not for any crimes, but to "save a village." What is this "village" which the Governor is trying to save? Obviously, it is the whole system of robbery, starvation, Jim Crowism, and lynching—the capitalist system.

The second thing which this southern ruler admits is that the whole government, including judges and governors, is a conscious part of the terrorist campaign against the Negro masses, particularly during the present general crisis.

The Fight Against Lynching

In the "race riots" after the last World-War—when Negro soldiers returned from a jim-crowed army demanding those equal rights promised them by President Wilson and W. E. B. DuBois—the ruling class whipped up lynch law on a mass scale in the North to keep the Negro "where he belonged." They were race riots, and not mass lynchings, only because the Negroes defended themselves and fought back.

Today, in the midst of a crisis which spreads starvation and mass suffering among all workers, and when a new world war is being prepared, the unity of black and white workers grows rap-

idly. It is this unity of black and white workers, struggling against their common enemy—the white bosses and their “Uncle Toms”—which will in the end sweep away all Jim Crow lines and destroy the system of class and national oppression. The militant fight for Negro rights, participated in by growing sections of the white workers, is giving the lie to the slander of the “race leaders” that the white workers are the enemies of the Negroes.

Already on one-sixth of the world, in the Soviet Union, the workers and peasants have established their own government. They have liberated all the oppressed nationalities which groaned under the capitalist lash of the tsars. Today in the Soviet Union 132 peoples which formerly were taught to hate or mistrust one another are now cooperating in full social and political equality in the building of a socialist society. The workers there have destroyed the capitalist lie of “race hatred” and “race inferiority.” Any worker who shows any trace of this capitalist poison is expelled from the factories, as two American engineers only recently learned. The Soviet workers have shown the American workers, Negro and white, a glorious example and the true road.

And because the Soviet Union points the road to the wiping away of all oppression and “race” lies, the whole ruling class is today preparing a gigantic war against it. When the Negro soldiers returned from the last war, they returned to the same old persecution and Jim Crow insult. Some Negro soldiers were lynched in their uniforms. Today the ruling class is trying to make the Negroes “safe” for the next war. American imperialism does not want a dangerous “back door,” such as Ireland was for the British Empire in the last war. Only the organized efforts of the working class in fighting unity—Negro and white—can defend the Soviet Union and struggle against imperialist war. Only this unity can destroy lynching and the system which causes it.

The white workers, led to a proper understanding by the Communist Party, are beginning to realize that any attack upon the Negroes, any denial of rights to them, is also an attack upon the white workers, also a denial of the rights of the white workers. Militant white workers are actually *taking the lead* in fighting for Negro rights and against lynching.

As is shown in the Scottsboro case and in other similar struggles the revolutionary white workers are the first to demand the right of Negro workers to sit on juries, the wiping away of all Jim Crow and segregation lines. James W. Ford, a Negro worker born in Alabama, whose grandfather was the victim of a lynch mob, is the Communist Party candidate for United States vice-president in the 1932 elections, showing, as on numerous other occasions, that the Party's fight for full economic, social and political equality for the Negro people is one of its most important struggles.

Revolutionary white and Negro workers demand the *death penalty for lynchers*. They organize white and Negro workers together in the struggle against lynching and for Negro rights. They call for defense groups of white and Negro workers to beat off lynch mobs and combat such terrorist organizations as the Klu Klux Klan, the Night Riders, etc. Southern white workers, under the leadership of the International Labor Defense, were among the most active in building the defense of the Scottsboro boys.

At Bridgeport, Ohio, June 13, 1932, white and Negro workers saved Alex Dorsey, a Negro organizer of the National Miners' Union, from lynching at the hands of a mob led by the organizer of the United Mine Workers, the officials of which, like those of the American Federation of Labor, are supporters of lynch law.

While fighting for equal rights for the Negro in all parts of the country, the Communist Party strikes at the very basis of the oppression of the Negro people by demanding and fighting for the right of self-determination in the Black Belt of the South, where the Negroes form the majority of the population. This is the right of the Negro people in the Black Belt to exercise governmental authority over this land on which they have toiled for years, and the right to separate from the United States government if they so desire. Then, and then only, will the Negro people have achieved equal rights with all the other peoples of the earth, wiping out, through the militant alliance with the white workers, the abominable national oppression which is part and parcel of the capitalist system.

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