

Letters from America

Alabama's Blood-Smeared Cotton

“YOUR time has come, you black — — —!” screeched through the woods surrounding Ed Bracy's home. A few seconds later the gang of vigilantes broke into the house and shot him nineteen times in the neck and head. This was the second killing during the Cotton Pickers Strike. It happened on Labor Day.

Ed Bracy, militant Negro leader of the Share Croppers Union, around Hope Hill, had continued to lead the masses of strikers in spite of terror and murder threats. Sheriff R. E. Woodruff's vigilante gang sneaked in at night, like the cowards they are, to murder another leader. The masses have already answered this attack on leaders—“We are all leaders and we will fight on to victory,” they say. Since August 19, through the most vicious terror the landlords could unleash, the strikers have held their ranks solid. Such determination can only be born of dire poverty, starvation and oppression.

The terror drive continues. As I write this, there is a look-out to warn me of the approach of lynchers. Constant vigil is kept at all times. Sleep is tortured with nightmares of lynching, terror and murder. Food settles in lumps in your stomach. But the struggle must go on! The attack of the lynchers must be answered!

On August 22 they murdered Jim Press Meriwether, a Negro strike leader near Sandy Ridge. He walked by the home of Bennie Calloway, another striker, where Sheriff Woodruff's gang was beating the women. John Frank Bates, a Fort Deposit landlord, shot him down without a word. They found Jim's wife, beat her and hanged her from the rafters of the house for awhile before releasing her. Then they carried Jim to C. C. Ryles' plantation to question him. Getting no information from the dying man, they carried him out on a hillside and riddled his body with bullets.

Night riders, carrying Negro strikers out from their beds to beat them almost to death and throw them in the swamps. No sleep, no rest, but always watching for the terror gang. More than six strikers were carried out to be beaten. Some of them were unable to wear clothes on their back because of their wounds.

The search is hottest for me. Charles Tasker and James Jackson, Negro workers of Montgomery, were arrested on August 30. They were questioned continually about where I am. Later an I.L.D. lawyer secured their release. Detective Moseley carried them to the county line and told them to “Keep going and never come back!” They are forced to leave their homes and families.

The strike spreads. Montgomery, Tala-

poosa, Chambers, Lee and Randolph Counties are out solid now. The masses are willing to struggle, willing to sacrifice.

The small demands of the strike—\$1 a hundred for picking cotton, \$1 for 10 hours' work for wage hands, 20 cents an hour, 40 hours a week with pay in cash for relief workers—are more than 100 percent above the present rates, a grim testimony to the starvation conditions existing in the farming sections of the South. To maintain these conditions the landlords murder, terrorize and beat the strikers. The ugly head of fascism is rearing up in Dixie, in the “Cradle of the Confederacy.”

Strikers hide out in swamps in the daytime to avoid attacks of the vigilante gangs. The night Jim Meriwether was killed the strikers got their guns and waited for another vigilante attack. When the lynchers arrived the strikers sounded the battle cry, it was to be steel for steel on even terms. The lynchers, cowards at heart, turned and ran before a shot was fired.

In the meantime, the landlords are beginning to crack. In lower Montgomery County a landlord is paying his hands \$1 a day. In Reeltown, scene of the heroic Reeltown struggle of 1932, the landlords agreed to pay 75 cents a hundred and two meals for picking cotton. Around Dadeville and other

parts of Talapoosa County the price is rising, but the masses refuse to pick for less than their demands. Only the small farmers, tenants and croppers who pick their own cotton are carrying anything to the gin. The landlords' fields are heavy with cotton that has been ready to pick for three weeks. On J. R. Bell's plantation in Lowndes County, the strikers say “\$1 a hundred or let the cows eat it.”

In the meantime, the Share Croppers Union waits word from the Southern Tenant Farmers Union on the question of amalgamation. Now more than ever before the necessity for one powerful union in the cotton fields rings out. The murder and terror drive of the landlords is a clarion call for unity, for a powerful united struggle against the fascist attacks of the landlords and for raising the miserably low living standards of the southern rural masses.

In spite of all the odds, the strike goes on. It is historic, it is the greatest strike movement the landlords have ever witnessed. It is significant to all labor, it is raising the miserably low-wage standard on which Roosevelt based his wage-smashing Relief Wage Scale. It loosens the spirit of the Negro masses; they are struggling to the bitter end for their rights. It is imperative to America, it is battering down the ugly head of fascism in the “Cradle of American Fascism.”

ALBERT JACKSON.

Secretary, Share Croppers Union.

Law and Order in Kansas City

IT WAS nearly midnight. I was walking alone along a Kansas City, Mo., street. A car drew up ahead of me, two men stepped out and, as I came alongside, halted me.

“Where you going, Bud?” asked one, and the other “Where you been? What you got here?” and he seized my brief case.

I was bewildered, could scarcely speak, tried to push them aside, demanding “What is this?”

“We'll damn soon show you what this is, you damn Communist,” and with that they shoved me into the car.

I protested that I was not a Communist. “You know goddamn well you are,” the one in the front seat shouted and, turning, struck me twice across the head with a blackjack.

“Where you from?” asked the other.

“New York.”

“What the hell you doing out here?”

“Making a survey of the drought area in Kansas.”

“What for?”

“For a play.”

When I continued to protest at their actions, the one in the front seat turned: “When I get you down to the station, I'm gonna give you a working over. We're gonna clean all you — Communists out of town in thirty days,” he shouted, blowing alcoholic breath in my face.

We drew up to the station. I was marched inside and searched. In my brief case were a few copies of *The Farmers' Weekly*, a pamphlet *What Is Socialism*, a booklet *Drouth* and my notes, the result of two months' effort in the drought areas. All personal belongings, including my notes and \$19.18 in cash, were taken from me. While this was being done, the larger of the two detectives—Reddish was his name—was making advances towards an attractive girl who had just been brought in. She told him that she didn't know him, but he forced his attentions with lewd gestures. The boy who was typing my name turned to him. “What you got this man here for?” Reddish stammered something about “suspected Communist activities.”

Reddish led me into a side room, drew a

curtain, seized a hose. His lips were tightly pressed and he snarled: "How you like that?" and caught me across the head. When I held up my arms to defend myself, he struck me across the body and then across the legs, shouting "You goddamn Communist." The marks of the hose are still on my body two weeks later as I write this.

He and Hanson, the other detective, then booked me with the police department. I reiterated that I had intended to leave for New York the next day. "You'll leave for New York all right, but not tomorrow. You'll stick around here for a while first." I asked to use the telephone. "The telephone? Who the hell you think you are, you damn Communist?" I was turned over to two turnkeys, taken to the elevator, lowered three stories, fingerprinted. Steel doors opened. I was shown to a cell and the bars clanged behind me.

All this had happened so suddenly that I could scarcely believe my senses. I had just come from the home of a member of the American Workers Union. This man had been most helpful to me before I entered the drought area, suggesting points to visit, and I had stopped to thank him for his help before returning to New York. Furthermore, I am not a Communist but a registered member of the Democratic Party in New York City. "And suppose I were a Communist?" I asked myself. "What of it?" However, here I was, born in Nebraska, living there until I was ten, living in the state of Washington for the next fourteen years, subsequently doing a year's graduate work at Harvard, and then coming to New York, where I have been employed almost continuously ever since. Still, all this apparently meant nothing to the "Law." I had found that it is not safe for an American citizen to walk the streets of an American city. "After all," I asked myself, "am I in America or in Germany?"

Next morning we lined up for the "show-up." My turn came. The door opened and I was shoved upon a small platform with footlights and border lights blinding me. Across the footlights I could see one face brightly illuminated. I was vaguely conscious of others out ahead—of shadowy faces through a thin screen. The face droned: "Ever been arrested before?"

"No, sir."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Where are you staying?"

"I have no headquarters. I just reached here yesterday afternoon and hadn't yet found a hotel for the night."

"You are on your way back to New York?"

"Yes."

"Got enough money to get you there?"

"Yes."

I was taken downstairs again. Soon I was sent for and a bondsman tried to shake me down. "I can get you out of here for \$25."

I refused to have anything to do with him. He tried pressure: "You know even when they release you, that doesn't mean anything. They might pick you up while you're going out the door and throw you in again." I had heard from other prisoners that this actually happened.

When he finally gave me up and left, smiling rather cynically, I asked again to use the telephone but was refused. Then downstairs again and into a cell with a Filipino, about 27, arrested on a charge of defrauding the American Railway Express. He had been there several days and, as the day wore on, kept muttering to himself, "I'm worried." He was on the lower bunk and, stretched out above him, I could feel every move he made. During the day from time to time, I paced the cell, three short paces forward and back, forward and back. So far and no farther. At first I walked quickly, found my nerves getting more and more on edge, said to myself: "Take it easy now. Don't let this get the best of you. Easy now. Slower." And I gradually got myself under control. Confinement is difficult enough for anyone, but it was especially difficult for me as I had been walking fifteen miles a day often during the last two months and been living a most active life.

About seven that evening, while I was stretched on my bunk, the Filipino gave one of his periodic bangs on his bunk. I jumped to the floor and shouted to one of the prisoners who was allowed to walk between the cells: "I've got to get out of here. I tell you I must get out of this cell." While I gripped the bars, he talked to me: "Take it easy now. I'll talk to the turnkey when he comes and see if anything can be done." It was possible to arrange with a turnkey to walk between the cells during his eight-hour shift by giving him a dollar. A little later, when he came, I found it was too late to do anything. I must make the best of things until morning. I turned my attention to the Filipino, soon had him talking about his native islands and, in so doing, I gradually got my nerves as well as his under control.

To one who has never experienced confinement it will be difficult to appreciate the feelings I have just described. For a time I thought that I would lose my mind. Occasionally that does happen to prisoners. While I was confined, now and then during the night hours or a lull in the prisoners' talking, some poor fellow would let out a shrill squeal and the other prisoners would look at each other questioningly.

During my confinement I learned of unbelievable brutality. One prisoner was taken from his cell on three successive nights and beaten for nearly three hours each night. At times a man is taken "to the river" for these beatings and dies as a result. Such methods of terror and brutality are practised with almost a free hand upon investigation prisoners as there is no way for them to communicate with the outside world. If the authorities decide they have no case against a man, they generally do not release him until the marks of their inhuman beatings are gone.

Graft pervades the whole set up. Even the turnkeys get their rake-off from prisoners who happen to have any money. As prisoners are fed only two sandwiches at 11:30 and two at 4:30 they do at times want more to eat. The turnkeys, very obligingly, will bring in five-cent sandwiches for fifteen cents; a five-cent cut of pie for the same price; a ten-cent bottle of coffee for twenty-five cents. Cigarettes are twenty-five cents and a five-cent bag of tobacco, ten cents.

Legally, I could be confined only forty-eight hours. However, I was confined nearly five days, 113 hours to be exact, refused advice of counsel and denied the right even to make a telephone call. But my case was not unusual. Often prisoners are confined six or eight days. While I was confined, one prisoner had been there eighteen days and another twenty with no chance to communicate with the outside. When I was released my notes were not returned and the detectives gave me just two hours to get out of town, saying: "If we pick you up again, it's gonna be your ass this time, you goddamn Communist."

LOWELL C. CHAMBERLAIN.

Rain On Our Hands

Now are the old faiths gone: what have we left?
No longer the coin's glitter, the solid weight in our fingers,
The thin, the fragile strength of ancient faith.

We have turned fields, we have watched the gold miracle of
grain lie wasted.

Having seen the white bloom of cotton swollen in the sun,
We have not turned our futile hands.

Now, unmoved, we have looked on the tall cities over us.
Now is the hunger and the stir of throngs gone out of us.
Now are the old faiths gone: what have we left?

What have we other than these:

Ultimate earth

A final sky

Rain on our hands?

GLADYS LA FLAMME