

Mississippi Slavery in 1933

By ROY WILKINS

THE first thing which hits you between the eyes in the Delta is the poverty of the people. Eight months of the year they work for "Mistuh Somebody" on his plantation, either as a sharecropper or tenant. They are lucky if, with "Mistuh Somebody's" bookkeeping, they come out even. Everywhere you meet the same

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grumble: "Nossuh, you cain't make anything. You gets a little somethin' to eat and yo' seed and a place to sleep. No clothes. No cash money, nossuh!"

That's the rub—cash money. The old peonage run-around. Credit at the store for molasses, meal, salt pork, sugar, salt, flour, a bit of chewing tobacco. Settling up at the boss man's

prices. Only a few dollars in hand from one year's end to another. In the four months between crops some of the farmers seek employment on "public works" as they call road building and levee construction. But the levee work, while it promises the much desired cash money, actually delivers no more than the plantation owner.

81

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Practical Slavery

It is no exaggeration to state that the conditions under which Negroes work in the federally-financed Mississippi levee construction camps approximate virtual slavery. In December, 1931, two investigators for the American Federation of Labor so branded the working conditions; in July, 1932, Miss Helen Boardman, investigating for the N.A.A.C.P. found some conditions worse than slavery; and in December, 1932, George S. Schuyler and I discovered that the previous reports were not exaggerated in the least.

If my plantation friend, with whom I spent a night in his cabin in the cotton, managed to get a job, he would be promised \$1.00 a day for common labor, perhaps \$1.25. If he could drive a tractor he would be promised \$1.50 or, in rare cases, \$2.00 a day. He would work from 5:30 A. M. until 5:30 P. M., with a "snatch" lunch on the job at noon. Or, if he was on a night crew, he would work from 5:30 P. M. until 5:30 A. M. under flood lights. In some camps he would work on the day shift from 4:30 A. M. until 6:30 P. M. with no overtime. As one lad told me: "Sometimes they comes and rousts you out at 3:30 in the morning, telling you it's too cold to work the night crew any longer. You got to get up and hit it."

The worst tale of hours I heard was from a "cat" driver (caterpillar tractor driver) who said he had worked for one contractor for a few weeks on one shift—and that shift was *eighteen hours long*. "They decided to do away with the night shift," he said, "and work all the gang straight through. So we turned out at 3 A. M. and worked right on up to 9 P. M. Yassuh! And the day the sleet started—I think it was December 9—they worked us in that snow and sleet right up to midnight before knocking off."

In many sections of the Delta a seven-day week is the rule. In some counties in Mississippi the curious religion of the region prohibits work on Sundays. It is that good old-fashioned religion which sees nothing wrong in working the hearts out of God's children and robbing them for six days a week, but insists the seventh day must be for rest and worship—to say nothing of counting profits and figuring out the exploitation of the next six days.

Pay Days Now and Then

While there is complaint from workers on all the forms of exploitation, the greatest wail is against the irregular pay day system. The men grumble over the small pay, the long hours, the cursing, the beating, the food, the tents, the commissary fleecing, but they reserve their greatest bitterness for the contractor who "won't pay you even that little you got coming."

I heard of at least two contractors who had paid off in December for the first time since August and September, respectively. This system is a great one for the contractor. The longer the pay days are withheld, the more food and clothes the men buy at the camp commissary at the high prices in vogue there. Then, too, there is the money-lending business which all foremen carry on at twenty-five cents interest on the dollar. If pay days are dragged out two and three months apart, with commissary prices at the pleasure of the contractor, a workman has only a dollar or two of cash money coming to him at the end of three months.

Then there are those other deductions: a lump sum, three or four dollars a week for commissary, whether one uses that amount or not; fifty cents for drinking water; fifty cents for the cook (single men pay this); fifty or seventy-five cents tent rent. Now, suppose you are my friend, whom I shall call Smith. We are huddling around a tin blast stove in his sister's home where I have succeeded in getting a bed for the night. We both are planning to go out to "Mistuh Charlie's" camp the next morning and ask for a job. Says Smith:

"I hope I get on. He don't pay much, but he pay off regular. I know every two weeks I gwine get nine dollars and fo' bits. They keep out the rest, you know."

Another acquaintance with whom I rode ten miles on a flat car of a mixed freight and passenger train, voiced the almost universal sentiment:

"These white folks don't do us right. They's something crooked going on and I wouldn't be the one to say whose doing it, though I got my ideas. We works too hard and too long for the little money we gets. But I say this, they is two things I won't stand for. One is cursing me and calling me 'nigger' and the other is not paying off. I want my money and I don't want nobody calling me names."

The Army Engineers Know

When the N.A.A.C.P. first sent a copy of Miss Boardman's report to the War department, Major General Lytle Brown, chief of engineers, stuttered with rage because Negroes had presumed to poke their noses into the War department's pet flood control project.

We suspected at the time that the general was a little excited and was talking too much. He gave himself away by becoming so angry, not at the charges, but at the nerve of Negroes making the charges. He would have been foaming and sputtering yet, no doubt, had not Secretary Hurley taken the correspondence away from him.

But when I went down into the camps

I saw plainly why the general boiled over. The War department knows all about this exploitation on the river. It knows all about the long hours, the low pay, the commissaries, the beatings the living conditions in the camps. In every camp there lives a War department engineer. The flag of the United States floats above his tent and over the sweating backs of the "free" black citizens who swear allegiance to it. It may be that the War department cannot do anything about the conditions, but if that is so, why doesn't it say so? Why does it say they do not exist? Why does it interpose the most strenuous objections to a thorough-going inquiry by the senate? Why was General Brown so curt, so arrogant and so contemptuous in his testimony before the house committee on labor last February, when he was questioned on the levee labor conditions? In short, what does the War department have to hide in this matter?

Millions in Wages

This fight is more than a struggle against inhuman conditions. It is estimated that a minimum sum of five millions of dollars a year would be added to the wages of Negroes on the flood control project if they were paid a decent scale. The maximum estimate is ten millions of dollars. The project is a ten-year proposition. That means that between fifty and one hundred millions of dollars would go into the pockets of Negro workers in the next ten years if proper hours and wages were the rule on the levee jobs.

The N.A.A.C.P. proposes to: first, secure a senate investigation which will officially record the existence of the levee slavery; second, get the levee construction placed within the provisions of the eight-hour law; third, secure the prevailing rate of wage scale for levee workers.

The rural folk, exploited by planters with the sanction of the local government and by contractors with the sanction of the federal government, helpless except for individual bravado and appeals to the rulers for justice, hope for help from the outside. The people in the Delta have no vote and no one responsive to their wills. Other people, elsewhere in the country, who can make demands and back them with votes, need to drive home to their senators the necessity for laying this whole mess bare. The Wagner resolution was passed February 22. You can help now by writing Senator Robert F. Wagner thanking him and saying you wish a thorough examination into all the charges. The Delta folk are helpless. You are not. You can help put millions of dollars in the hands of black workmen on the Mississippi and at the same time wipe out slavery in what is called fondly "the land of the free".

The Crisis

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