

# HELL ON WHEELS - By Donald Burke

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Donald Burke, who writes this article, is in charge of the 13-foot-long replicas of the chain-gang cage, mounted on a truck, which is now touring the country under the auspices of the International Labor Defense. The tour is part of the fight to free Angelo Herndon, sentenced to 18 to 20 years on the Georgia chain-gang.)

"IT'S almost impossible to believe that such awful things can be done to people in our country."

She is obviously a farmer's wife, tanned by years of toil on the dry fields of South Dakota, and burned out by cooking over a blazing cook-stove. She is standing with a group inspecting the model of a Georgia chain-gang wagon at the close of one of our meetings in Mitchell, South Dakota.

"But then when you think of the way they have been treating us farmers, foreclosing and throwing us off our farms, you might expect that they would try to put us on chain-gangs here too!"

## Unions in Danger

"That's right," said a man standing beside her, dressed in neat striped overalls and wearing a typical railroad man's leather watch strap, "We've got to help free this man Herndon. If they get away with killing him on the chain-gang, look what they'll do to our unions on the railroads. And the way they treat the Negroes, 'specially down South—I've heard plenty from men who have worked the Southern roads."

Everyone at the meeting signed the petition, among them the adult members of the only Negro family in the town. We had had some difficulty getting a permit from the Mayor, an egg dealer, but when he saw our delegation headed by the President of the Farmers' Union, he backed down, with a petulant warning that the police would be there to see that we did not say anything "inciting."

## Jim-Crow Beach

The sands of the Pacific draw thousands on blistering summer days in Los Angeles. But only "Nordic" skin may be exposed on most of the beaches. For the Negro people a little stretch at Santa

Monica has been set aside. Here come also large crowds of white workers and small businessmen for whom race barriers have been broken down.

We parked at the beach one Sunday afternoon, and over 600 names were signed to the Angelo Herndon petition when he left.

"Sure I'll sign that petition. And here, Mother, put your name down here. It's to help free this boy we heard that got 20 years on the chain-gang down in Georgia just for trying to get relief for the colored and white unemployed."

The speaker was a young Negro girl. She studied the cage and the display of John L. Spivak's photos which show prisoners being tortured on the stocks, the stretching post, a young boy lashed to a pick and left lying in the sun, and other vivid pictures of chain-gang traditions.

## Lynch-Incitement

Not satisfied with just giving her own signature, and that of her mother, she began speaking to others who had gathered.

"Look at this beach! We're segregated, and that isn't all. Right now the papers are trying to get up a lynching, with headlines that a mob is looking for an unknown Negro man who they say 'insulted' some white woman over in Watts."

"Yes, that's it—that old story. 'Rape.' Or 'insulting,' or something like that. That's what they always said down in Mississippi where I come from. An I've seen the chain-gang too. They used to camp right below us. Many a time I could hear 'em whipping the prisoners. You know, it sounded just like a rifle shot, and I felt just like it was cutting into me." The old mother went off slowly, telling stories from her past, vividly reawakened by the I. L. D. exhibit of the horrors awaiting young Angelo.

## Union Meeting

A meeting of the United Mine Workers of America, Rock Springs, Wyoming, local is going on. The members are all at the windows listening to our meeting, down on the corner. Our talk reaches them through the loudspeaker, but later they come down to have a look at the cage. Some of them are black-skinned—this local believes in unity.

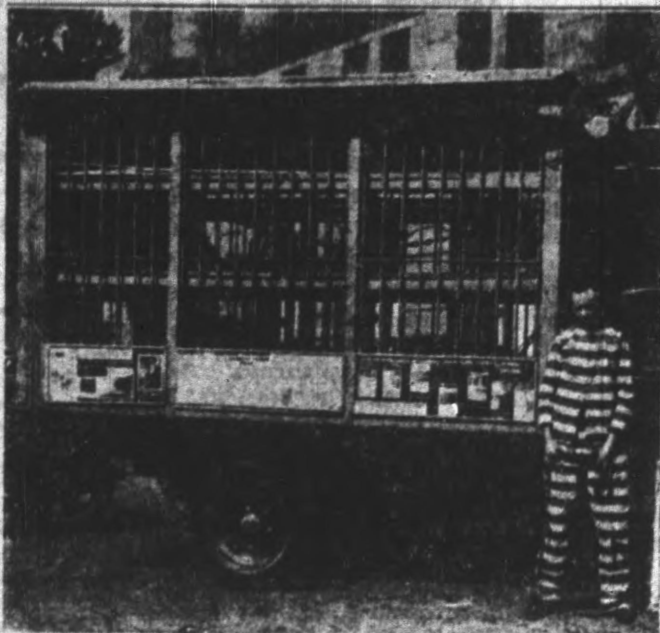
"They say this Herndon was a miner himself, in the South. That's where they've kept breaking strikes by playing off black against white, and vice versa. But I guess he was breaking that down getting the white and colored to stick together."

"Yeah, that's what they've got against him so much. He had the guts to stand up for his rights, and they had to give some relief for

silver dollars was dropped in the hats. One old fellow, who told us later that his back was broken by a fall of rock and that he's still fighting for compensation, gave us \$5 to help free Herndon and the Scottsboro boys.

## Hunger Demonstration

Both City and County administrations are housed in one building



The chain-gang cage, mounted on a truck, which is touring the country in the fight to free Angelo Herndon from a 20-year sentence on the Georgia chain-gang.

both the Negro and white workers."

"Look at these chains, how'd you like to have these on your legs?"

"No sir! But look here what they do to you if you talk back; or get 'em down on you anyway. I saw that picture I'm a Fugitive from the Chain-Gang, but they didn't show all this. I guess them movie men didn't want to tell the whole story. This here International Labor Defense (he spelled out the name from the sign on the back), they aren't afraid to expose these things. This cage is sure Hell on Wheels!"

An appeal for funds was made, and over \$17, much of it in large

one refers to our presence, and the similarity between their own struggle, and that in which Herndon was arrested. Then the meeting is turned over to us.

They listen intently, reacting to each point, warmly conscious of the attack on themselves made by Herndon's sentence to a living hell. The resolutions are passed with an "aye" which could be heard far outside the City and County building. And even here, from this crowd of unemployed, a silver dollar was in the collection which was made to send us on our way across the desert plains—bringing the story of Angelo Herndon to the white and Negro masses in city, town and country.

"Tell them that Salt Lake City is in the fight to free Angelo Herndon!"

## At Scene of Ford Massacre

As this is written, the chain-gang truck is parked on Woodward Ave., Detroit, the street down which marched 70,000 workers several years ago behind the bullet-riddled bodies of four workers murdered by Henry Ford's gunmen, because they asked for jobs or relief.

People are attracted by the crowd examining the truck and listening to the several members of the I. L. D. who explain the Herndon case and the tortures of the chain-gang. They stop anywhere from five minutes to half an hour. They sign their names—some drop contributions for the defense fund in the box.

"It's hard to believe."

This is the most common expression. But then, too, these people are mostly from the same class as Herndon, the class which produces all and receives little. So it is not hard for them to believe that even under democracy, with all of its boasted "rights," the ruling class can and does torture, beat and murder those who cry out in the name of the people.

So, practically without exception, every man and woman, black or white, having seen the hell which faces Herndon down in Georgia, signs the petition which rolls across the country gathering the storm of two million voices shouting:

"FREE ANGELO HERNDON!"