

FORCED LABOR ON A MISSISSIPPI RIVER LEVEE PROJECT

By CYRIL BRIGGS

CONDITIONS of slavery and forced labor so brazenly open as to force themselves upon the reluctant attention of the A. F. of L. fascist leadership have been uncovered in the Mississippi River levee project, a United States government undertaking. The brutal conditions imposed upon Negro and white workers on this government flood control job are described in a report to William Green as "slavery in its most hideous form."

Green, anxious as ever to cover up the crimes of the bosses and their government against the working class, has not released the report for publication. The capitalist press admits, however, that the report charges that gross brutality, including floggings and beatings with pistol butts, prevails in the labor camps along the levee. Negro workers, as usual, receive the full venom of the slave drivers' hate and are singled out for the most savage and revolting torture and persecution. The inhuman 12-hour day is the regular working day on this government project. And often the men are forced to work 18 hours a day at the most heart-rending toil, with no pay for overtime. The unskilled laborers are paid the starvation wage of 75 cents a day. The skilled workers fare a little better, with \$2 a day; \$4.50 and \$12 a week; these are the magnificent rewards for a week of life-rending toil in capitalist America! Nor do most of the workers actually receive these "rewards." Commissary trading is obligatory. Charges for food are exorbitant. Arbitrary reductions for supplies are made from the wages of the men. A United Press dispatch from Gulfport admits:

"From the pay of laborers, arbitrary reductions of \$4.50 a man for a week's commissary supplies are made whether the supplies are drawn or not, as well as tent rental of \$1 a week and cook hire of 50 cents a week, the report said."

The laborer who draws only \$4.50 for a week's work is in debt at the end of the week. More than 4,000 Negro and white workers are said to be affected.

Further admissions of the brutal treatment of these workers are contained in an Associated Press dispatch:

"News that a Federation of Labor investigator was going to report conditions of incredible brutality and use of lash and pistol on Negro laborers held in virtual peonage by contractors on the big government flood control job set in motion a War Department investigation."

Green has buried the report, but some of its findings have found their way into print. The A. F. of L., with its usual tender solicitude for the protection of the Wall Street dictatorship, has already exonerated the government. The report places the blame on the general contractors. And now the War Department will proceed in a fake investigation to whitewash the contractors. In the end, it will be proved, at least to the satisfaction of the fat-bellied bosses and A. F. of L. leaders, that the workers themselves are responsible for the frightful conditions on this government flood control job.

At the same time that the A. F. of L. was forced into this half-hearted and reluctant investigation, the full facts of which Green has buried in his office files, peonage conditions were also being exposed in New York state. Laborers on state construction jobs are reported forced to "live like peons and were treated like coolies." A Buffalo boss newspaper admits that the workers are paid under the prevailing labor scale, are forced to live in unsanitary shacks, made to pay high prices for room and board and "were tempted to expend their wages on liquor and gambling."

Peonage conditions, widespread in the South, are not confined to that section. Whether in New York or in Mississippi, capitalism is engaged in a brutal oppression and enslavement of the toiling masses. For the cruelly exploited white and Negro workers there is only one way out of capitalist robbery and oppression of the workers, and that way is by the revolutionary overthrow of the vicious capitalist system and the establishment of workers' and farmers' governments in every country.