

LIBERIA AND SLAVERY

by

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THE RECENT PUBLICATION of the report of the International Commission of Inquiry into the existence of slavery and forced labor in the republic of Liberia, has disclosed to public view an unusual sense of solidarity on the part of Negro newspapers in the United States. Editorial comments in most of the Negro papers I have seen also reveal the encouraging fact that for once our editors did not permit the wool to be pulled over their eyes by any hypocritical appeal to "morality". Calmly and with poise they considered the facts and made scholarly comparisons between conditions in Liberia and the United States.

IN MY ARTICLE of a week ago entitled "UNCLE SAM STRIKES A MORAL POSE" I indicated that the "discovery" of slavery in Liberia, by the United States in particular, may yet turn out to be not wholly un-related to the financial and economic interest of Mr. Harvey S. Firestone in the Negro republic. Hardly had my article reached the press when Mr. R. L. Buell, of the Foreign Policy Association, denounced as onerous the terms of the 1927 Firestone concessions in Liberia. In a special despatch to the New York Times on January 13th, Mr. Buell asserted that "Liberia could not be reconstructed internally unless Harvey S. Firestone agreed to modify these terms extensively".

THE FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION'S official further revealed that Mr. Firestone held the power of veto over a new refunding loan for Liberia. He called upon the rubber magnate to waive this right and also to keep down his rubber plantations from the projected 1,000,000 acres to their present scope of about 55,000 acres with 10,000 workers. As a necessary step toward relieving Liberia "of the onerous interest burden" he also called for "an abandonment of the American receivership of Liberia" and the substitution therefor of an international system of control; "Do we want to continue to shield Liberia from the outside world in return for certain exclusive privileges, but without doing anything fundamental to secure Liberia's regeneration?" he asks.

COMMENT ON MR. BUELL'S REMARKS would be superfluous. That he is thoroughly acquainted with the facts in the case and knows from whence he speaks, is attested to by the fact that two years ago he investigated conditions in Liberia and as a result, made practically the same criticism he now makes. His charges then as now were denied as "wholly inaccurate" by both the Firestone interest and our State Department. Nevertheless, it might not be amiss to point out that, in spite of what others might think, and the moral pose of Uncle Sam notwithstanding, this whole question of Liberia and slavery is at bottom an economic one.

THE APPEAL TO THE outraged conscience of mankind reminds me of the story of a Jewish lad who was standing one morning outside of his father's butcher shop when an Irish lad of about equal age and size strolled up. Soon the two boys were fighting. From his vantage point in the shop the father of the little Jewish boy watched the

contest. He noticed that his son stood practically still on the same spot while being pummelled by the Irish boy. Disgusted and angered because of his son's apparent non-desire to fight back the old man called to the boy to cease fighting and come inside the shop. With tear-stained eyes the little Isrealite stared at his father and said: "Papa! I cant come now, I got my foot on a nickel". If Mr. Buell and Mr. Firestone and Uncle Sam continue to take and strike moral poses, even those of us who are less keen of vision than others may yet discover the "nickel" under somebody's foot.

OF THE EDITORIAL COMMENTS I have been privileged to read on the subject the following, taken from the New Leader, a Socialist weekly published in New York City, strikes me as of most interest to Negroes and deserves to be carefully read by every wide awake worker. It is entitled NEGRO SERVITUDE.

### The Editorial

"It is the irony of history that Liberia, founded as a refuge for fugitive and emancipated slaves, should become notorious for enforced labor and slavery. Even the name of the country is a symbol for that liberty which was to come to those who had endured bondage.

"On the other hand it should not be forgotten that slavery and the slave trade with Africe were fostered by the Christian Powers with the early rise of capitalism. The natives had been accustomed to slavery and native chiefs had engaged in the slave traffic, but it was not till the rise of commercial and mercantile capital that it assumed the horrors depicted by the historians.

"Incidentally, for the Negro in the United States and elsewhere, this scandal enforces certain truths which he cannot afford to ignore. Racial and national solidarity in politics leads to illusion and thwarted hopes. In Liberia, Negroes are enslaved by Negroes. The conflict of interest within the race is evident. If white soldiers were exclusive masters, then racial solidarity would be intelligent and necessary and all Negroes would be in the exploited class.

"But it is otherwise when Negroes are in both the exploiting and the exploited classes as in Liberia, where slavery exists, and in the United States, where capitalism rules. In the latter case the Negro worker's welfare is bound up with that of the white worker. His interest is no more bound up with the interest of the Negro owner of capital than the white worker's interest is bound up with the interest of the white owner of capital.

"It is often difficult for Negro workers to understand this because of their long subjection to servitude and the continuance in this country of color prejudice. More of them are coming to see it and as class consciousness emerges they will find their way into the Socialist Party."