

Peons Without That Piny Scent

For a nation which prides itself on having abolished slavery almost a century ago, we are a gang of smug hypocrites. In *The Nation* recently, O. K. Armstrong called attention to legal peonage in Florida, where Negroes draw sentences of six months on the chain gang for "jumping accounts," failing to perform a contract of labor in the turpentine or lumber camps.

"Six months of back-breaking, blistering toil, with pick and shovel, working to build Florida's roads. Ten hours a day of steady work. Gang of twenty or more under strict guard. Locked in the steel cages at night,

with only the respite of Sundays to look forward to."

Says a judge: "It helped us build our roads." Says Governor Cone: "You have to have a law like that down here. If you didn't, no turpentine man could hold his workmen."

The spectacle stirs one to want to start marching through Georgia again. But should it? Here is a more hideous aspect of the slavery with which one meets on every hand. There is no need to go to Florida to seek it out. For the man who is robbed of economic opportunities, denied free access to the land on which alone his labor can produce wealth

with the aid of capital, must remain subject to him who can call the resources of nature his property.

In every state you will find men working on the roads for WPA, doing back-breaking, blistering toil for wages on which they can hardly subsist. A six months' sentence? No, the farmers, factory hands, clerks and men of other occupations in the WPA road gangs, in despair from futile hunts for work at their trades, would like a life sentence if they could lobby it through. The spectacle is less hideous, but just as degrading.

That is not to say that the impending movement to fight the Florida contract labor law on grounds of its constitutionality should not be encouraged. The law, and any similar one elsewhere, should be wiped off the books.

But it should be understood that this would abolish only the more brutal aspect of peonage. The more insidious kind—from which none of us are free—will remain until we make natural opportunities and forces free to labor by socializing the rent of land and abolishing taxation—the only measures which will really free labor.

—W. L.

See: "Social Problems," pp. 148-160.
"Teachers Manual (P. & P.)," L.
VII, 3, 10;