

135. Letter to Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins (1937)

Source: Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, ed., "Slaves of the Depression": Workers' Letters about Life on the Job (Ithaca, N.Y., 1987), pp. 103-04.

The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president in 1932 did much to rekindle hope among the victims of the Great Depression, the worst economic disaster in American history. Throughout the 1930s, ordinary Americans, one of whom referred to the downtrodden as "slaves of the depression," wrote poignant letters to federal officials describing the oppressive working conditions of those who retained their jobs and the difficulty of finding work for the unemployed. They wrote of the threat of starvation, the impossibility of obtaining medical care when ill, and the abuses of dictatorial employers and supervisors. One such letter, addressed to Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, described the "terrible and inhuman condition" of workers in the sugar fields of Louisiana.

PLAQUEMINE, LOUISIANA, JULY 27, 1937

Dear Miss Perkins:

I am writing to you because I think you are pretty square to the average laboring man. but I am wondering if anyone has told you of the cruel and terrible condition that exist in this part of the country

or the so called sugar cane belt in Louisiana. I am sure that it hasn't made any progress or improvement since slavery days and to many people here that toil the soil or saw mills as laboring men I am sure slavery days were much better for the black slaves had their meals for sure three times a day and medical attention at that. but if an American nowadays had that much he is a communist I am speaking of the labor not the ones that the government give a sugar bounty too but the real forgotten people for the ones the government give the sugar bounty too are the ones that really don't need it for those same people that has drawn the sugar bonus for two years has never gave an extra penny to their white and black slaves labor. I will now make an effort to give you an idea of the terrible inhuman condition.

I will first give you the idea of the sugar cane tenants and plantations poor laboring people. The bell rings at 2 a.m. in the morning when all should really be sleeping at rest. they work in the summer until 9 or 10 a.m. the reason they knock them off from the heat is not because of killing the labor from heat but they are afraid it kills the mule not the slave. Their wages runs from 90¢ to \$1.10 per day. Their average days per week runs from three to four days a week in other words people that are living in so called United States have to live on the about \$4.00 per week standing of living in a so called American Community which is way below the Chinese standard of living for the Chinese at least have a cheaper food and clothing living but here one has to pay dear for food and clothing because these sugar cane slave owners *not* only give inhuman wages but the ones that work for them have to buy to their stores, which sells from 50 per cent to 60 per cent higher than the stores in town still these same people that are worst than the old time slave owners or yelling and hollering for more sugar protection, why should they get more when they don't pay their white and black slaves more. It is true they give the white and black slaves a place to live on. But Miss Perkins if you were to see these places they live on you'd swear that this is not our so call rich America with it high standing of living for I am sure that the lowest places in China or Mexico or Africa has better

places to live in. These Southern Senators which are backed by the big shots will tell you it is cheaper to live in the South but have you investigated their living condition. Sometimes I don't wonder why some of these people don't be really communism but they are true Americans only they are living in such a low standing of living that one wouldn't believe they are living in the good old U.S.A.

Now regarding the saw mills of this town and other towns in this section but most particular this town they pay slightly more than the plantation but they get it back by charging more for food & clothing which they have to buy in their stores.

I am writing you this hoping that you will try to read it and understand the situation which if you think is not true you can send an investigator in this section of Louisiana that has American freedom of speech for some hasn't that speech in our so called free America and if you can get in touch with people who are not concern about it I am sure you will see that I am right and I do hope that you are kind enough to give this your carefully attention and I am sure that President Roosevelt nor Mrs. Roosevelt nor you would like to see this terrible and inhuman condition go on worst now then old slavery days for I know you people believe in the real American standing of living.

Again I will call your attention if you don't believe of the slave wages condition in this lost part of U.S. investigate and you will find out. Thanking you for humanity sake.

R.J.

Questions

1. Why does the writer feel that Secretary of Labor Perkins will give the letter a sympathetic reading?
 2. Why does the writer refer to "our so called free America"?
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