Negro Segregation Comes North

By WALTER WHITE

In 1915 and 1916 various Southern and border cities, including Baltimore, Dallas, St. Louis, Louisville, and some eight or ten other municipalities enacted ordinances designed to confine colored people to certain restricted areas in those cities, creating Negro ghettos where the rights of these citizens were limited and the stamp of inferiority was put upon them. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People took a case arising from the passage of the ordinance in Louisville, Kentucky, carried it to the United States Supreme Court, and secured a unanimous decision which declared such ordinances to be not only an illegitimate exercise of the police power of the State, but a direct violation of the Federal Constitution.

With the cessation of European migration and the speeding up of Northern industries during and after the war, the great migration of Negroes from the South took place. Defeated in one attempt to limit the districts in which Negroes might live, the segregationists devised a new scheme to serve the same purpose as that intended in the ordinances which the Supreme Court had declared unconstitutional. The new method was that of private agreements among property holders through the inclusion of covenants in deeds to property in which the purchaser agreed not to sell the property to any person of Negro race or blood upon pain of forfeiture, the agreement usually extending over a period of twenty-one years. A suit based upon this covenant is now pending in the United States Supreme Court.

Back of these two movements lies a nation-wide effort on the part of certain groups backed by the Ku Klux Klan, directly or indirectly, to prevent Negroes through legal action or brute force from living anywhere save in restricted ghettos. Two recent outbursts of mob violence are the dramatic high points of this movement.

The most serious one occurred in Detroit, Michigan. In 1906 some 6,000 Negroes were living in that city. By 1911 the number had increased to 8,000. In that year began the steady movement toward Detroit of Negroes who sought and secured employment in the various industrial plants of that city, a movement which reached its highest point in 1916, 1917, and 1918. Today there are some 65,000 Negroes in Detroit.

Obviously, it is impossible to put sixty-five gallons of water in an eight-gallon can without an overflow. In the Ford plants alone in Detroit there are today employed between 11,000 and 14,000 Negroes making an average of seven dollars a day, the total earned in wages each day by Negroes in these two plants reaching between $75,000 and $100,000. A very considerable majority of these Negroes have saved money despite the high cost of living in Detroit. A number of them have bought or are buying their homes. They have purchased these houses in various sections of Detroit, in most instances without molestation, but during the last few years there have been numerous cases of mob violence in efforts to check this very natural expansion of the areas in which Negroes live.

These outbursts of violence have had various contributory causes. As early as 1920, a number of Negroes were
shot and killed by policemen, especially in the neighborhood bordering on St. Antoine Street. There were inevitable retaliations in the killing of a number of policemen which led to very strained relations. A group of colored citizens in Detroit called upon the Commissioner of Police and pointed out that probably a number of the policemen who were giving the trouble were Southern whites. Commissioner Inches looked up the record of the policemen who were assigned to that precinct and found that a majority of them were from the South. He removed them to other districts, replacing these officers with Northern-born men. As a result the trouble ceased. But, with the growth of the Klan and a drive by that organization to recruit members among police and court employees, this trouble has broken out again, resulting in the shooting of fifty-five citizens by police officers from January 1 to September 1 of this year.

During the past year, there have been a number of instances where mobs have attacked the homes of Negroes who have purchased houses in what before were "white neighborhoods." Last spring a colored woman and her family were notified by certain white people to vacate the house which they had recently purchased. Upon their refusal to do so, whites stoned the house, breaking a number of windows and a door. The damage was repaired. When another attack was made, the colored woman fired at the mob. A neighbor, wife of a policeman, swore out a warrant against the colored woman. She was tried, but two colored attorneys successfully defended her and she was acquitted.

Later on a colored physician who had lived for eight years in a house on King Avenue, purchased the corner house which was next door to his own residence. When neighbors found that he planned moving into the corner house and renting his old home, neighborhood meetings were held and threats were made against him. The physician, however, moved into the new home and let it be known that he was going to protect his home and his family, if necessary. There was no further trouble. In June another colored man bought a home on Spokane Avenue in the northwestern section of the city. A mob broke into his home, smashed a great deal of the furniture, loaded the rest of it on a van and carried it back to this man's former home. Nothing was done by the police to prevent this attack.

Last spring Dr. O. H. Sweet, a colored physician who has been practicing in Detroit for four years—a graduate of Wilberforce and Howard Universities, who with his wife recently returned from Vienna where they had been studying—bought a home at 2905 Garland Avenue at the corner of Charlevoix. When Dr. Sweet moved into his home on the afternoon of September 8, there was a crowd outside which shouted and jeered but offered no violence. From seven o'clock that evening until four the next morning there was a large crowd outside the house though no attack was made on the Sweet home. The following evening the mob began gathering around seven o'clock. According to statements made by Dr. Sweet to me on September 18 in the Wayne County Jail there were some six hundred people massed directly in front of his house, with many hundreds more nearby. Dr. Sweet declared that about seven o'clock the mob began bombarding the house with bricks, stones, and other missiles. A little after eight o'clock Dr. Sweet's brother, a dentist, and a friend drove up to the house in a taxicab. When the mob saw that they were colored, it pelted them with missiles as they ran into the house. Shortly afterward there was firing and two men outside were hit—one man was killed and the other wounded. Police officers, which included an inspector, a lieutenant, and eight policemen, became very active at this point, rushed into the house, and arrested the eleven occupants, including Mrs. Sweet who has a fourteen-months-old baby.

On September 16, 17, and 18, a preliminary hearing was held before Judge Faust in the Detroit Recorder's Court. The prosecution introduced its witnesses, including Inspector Morton M. Schuknecht who declared under oath that there were only fifteen or twenty persons outside the house, that there was no disorder, and that he had heard of no threats against Dr. Sweet though he had found it necessary to detail ten men to this neighborhood to protect the house and two additional traffic officers, each a block away from the house, to divert traffic from those streets. Other witnesses produced by the prosecution testified to the same effect. An interesting fact was brought out about one of the witnesses. He, a police officer, under cross examination by one of the defense attorneys, revealed that he had been in Detroit only twenty months, having gone there directly from his birthplace, Tullahoma, Tennessee. He obviously hesitated being cross-examined, by a Negro attorney particularly, when he was asked if it would not be rather unusual for one so recently from the South to be sent to defend the home of a Northern Negro. Despite all the evidence, including the statements of the Detroit press that the mob numbered some five thousand, Judge Faust held all of the eleven defendants for trial, without bail, charged with murder in the first degree.

The Negroes of Detroit and a group of the better class of white citizens of that city have organized to defend Dr. Sweet and his ten co-defendants. Mayor John W. Smith has appointed an interracial committee composed of Tracy W. McGregor, philanthropist and business man, Fred H. Gilbert, manufacturer and president of the Detroit Citizens' League; Jefferson B. Webb, lumber man and former president of the Board of Commerce, Fred C. Dewey, president of the Wayne County Bar Association, these four being white; and four Negro members—W. Hayes McKinney, attorney and chairman of the Legal Redress Committee of the N. A. A. C. P., Dr. A. E. Carter, a physician, Walter Stowers, an attorney, and Lewis Marshall, supervisor of the four thousand Negro employees of the Ford Motor Company. This commission is designed to go thoroughly into the causes of ill feeling between certain classes of white and colored citizens in Detroit and to make such recommendations as are deemed advisable to prevent further disorders.

Another case similar to Dr. Sweet's has arisen in Staten Island, New York. In February, 1924, Samuel A. Browne, a mail carrier whose wife is a school teacher, bought a home in Castleton Hill, Staten Island. On purchasing the home from the former owner, a white woman from Kentucky, Mr. Brown asked particularly if there would be any trouble through his moving into the neighborhood. Upon being assured that there would be no trouble, the deal was consummated. Mr. Browne later
found that his next-door neighbor was from the South. Shortly after Mr. Browne and his wife and their four children moved into the house, trouble began.

Mr. Browne’s neighbor made an indirect offer to purchase the house for five hundred dollars more than what Mr. Browne paid. This offer was refused as Mr. Browne had purchased the house as a home for his family. Then began a campaign of threats against Mr. Browne. A number of these threats were signed “K. K.” Mass meetings were held in the neighborhood. Forty or more men marched up the street, halted before the house and faced it, this maneuver being repeated at frequent intervals. On several occasions, the house was bombarded with stones, windows and doors being broken, the shrubbery and lawn torn up. Seven times the fire insurance on the house was canceled by as many different companies. Mr. Browne was warned that his enemies had employed an ex-service man, an expert rifle shot; he was told that he would be shot as he carried mail on his route and that no one would ever know the killer. Similar threats were made against Mrs. Browne and the children, all of the four children being under ten years of age.

Mr. Browne secured a permit to keep firearms in his house and a long siege began. Night after night, week after week, month after month, the Brownes lived in a state of siege. Mrs. Browne taught school during the day and Mr. Browne carried mail on his route; they took turns sitting up at night to guard their home. Finally the authorities were stirred to action, a policeman was constantly on guard at the house, and finally the Richmond County Grand Jury indicted Museo M. Robinson, Mr. Browne’s neighbor from the South, and five others for conspiracy.

As the Negro population grows it is inevitable that the districts in which the Negroes formerly lived cannot continue to house them. They will move into districts where they can find better conditions than exist in the restricted areas. American democracy would be a poor thing indeed if such a desire for better conditions did not develop.

Continued brutality in opposing these natural efforts toward better living conditions is creating a spirit of grim determination among colored people to fight fire with fire. In one case in Detroit where threats had been made against a colored man, he and a friend borrowed several rifles and spent an afternoon sitting on their front porch cleaning the guns in plain view of their white neighbors. There was no trouble and for six years this man has lived in his house free from molestation. The question which must be answered by the authorities and by decent citizens throughout America is this: Are Negroes to be forced to resort to threats and bloodshed in order to secure decent places in which to live and rear their children?

A Back-Country Bolshevik

By ANNA LOUISE STRONG

Moscow, July 15

“DON’T you find it very lonesome in Russia, comrade? We are so much less civilized than you Americans” . . . I turn with a gasp to look at the tall, handsome man in white trousers and white Russian blouse who is addressing me. We are seated on the great dining-veranda of the Sverdlova Sanitarium in the health resorts of the northern Caucasus. It is a sanitarium of the Social Insurance, so all my companions are workers.

The tall, handsome speaker comes from the Donetz coal region and has told me already that “his specialty is making window-glass.” With equal pride of technique might a surgeon have announced his specialty as appendicitis. Russian factory workers today have this pride of calling.

“But what makes you think Americans more cultured than Russians?” I ask the glass-worker. Out from the social hall come the strains of a piano and a chorus of voices: the workers in the sanitarium have gathered informally after dinner to sing old folk songs. The night before we had had a symphony concert in our park, given by artists of the State Opera House down from Moscow. A lecture on Contemporary Literature by a famous speaker is announced for tomorrow. It is a bit startling to hear this white-clad gentleman revering my superior culture.

“We have only just learned to read and write in Russia,” he explains to me. “All the things that come after, science and art and technique and how to behave courteously to one another—we have hardly begun on those things. But your American workers learned to read and write when they were children. They must be ever so much more civilized than we.”

I try to reassure him. “It is true we have in America much better technique than you. Many more bath-tubs, more automobiles, a more comfortable life. Tremendous skyscrapers, and the most efficient industry in the world. Yet our factory workers do not know as much of world politics as yours do.” I remind him of the “living newspaper,” a feature in the amateur dramatics of every factory, in which the relations of France and Poland, or the latest scandal of the Balkans, are as intimately portrayed by Russian factory workers as the jests between freshman and sophomores in an American college fare.

“Politically it is true that we are awake,” he admits, “because of our revolution. But in other things we are asleep and backward.” I remind him of the symphony concert and ask if that is culture.

His view of America dies hard. After dinner we play as partners in a game of dominoes against two sailors from Odessa. The Russian dominoes is almost as scientific as whist. My partner is an excellent player, and I soon learn the meaning of his leads. Whenever we win, he shouts joyously to all who may listen: “Don Bas, organized—America, civilized! Together—unbeatable!”

The sanitarium in which we are staying, nestled in the foothills of the northern Caucasus, was once a private park, the resort of the wealthy and great of Russia. Imagine foothills like those of Southern California, with their mixture of great, bare, rolling height and pleasant, tree-filled valleys. Set in among these, sulphur springs, iron springs, soda springs, hot mud lakes, and around them a host of hotels with open verandas and vast stone bathing pavilions with many rooms and hundreds of skilled attendants.

Since the revolution all these sanitariums and hotels