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Sicilian Miners

Freedom Press

October, 1890

The miners who work the sulfur mines in the beautiful island of Sicily are some of the most unhappy victims of oppression on the face of the earth: the oppression of property, we mean. A comrade who has lately been among them sends us a description of the state of things.

You cannot conceive, he writes, a more primitive kind of work; there is no machinery to take the miners down into the pits or to bring the mineral up. All is done by hand, and the "hands" are moody little children. Children, some of whom are only six years old, have to carry on their shoulders loads weighing from one hundred to two hundred pounds, up steep, rough, broken flights of steps for two or three hundred yards. The poor little creatures arrive at the top utterly broken down with fatigue, often crying, and scarcely able to move. But all the same the "pioneer" drives them down again for more with his whip. The sight is simply heartrending. These boys are almost all hump-backed, and, of course, their miserable lives are but short. They have been bought of their parents, much as English children used to be bought of the parish authorities in the early days of the great industry here. The pioneer gives the family a

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Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism, Vol. 4, No. 47,
online source RevoltLib.com, retrieved on May 2, 2020.

Freedom Press (ed.)

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”help” of from 1 pound to 5 pounds, and in return has a right to the children’s work until the money is paid back.

This slave-driver is himself a slave, and often a hard-driven one. The system is for the mine owner to let the mine to a contractor, stipulating for say 20 per cent on the profits; the contractor underlets the mine to a sub-contractor, with the same sort of agreement, and so on, through a longer or shorter series of harpies, until we reach the last of the contractors. This man engages a pioneer, and pays him 25/8 a week. The pioneer himself engages the boys, and gets 12/10 on their labor, so that, after all, he has not so very much to live on. But the wretchedness of the miners themselves is indescribable. Their situation has gone from bad to worse, year after year, until their life has become quite savage. At Catanisetta, the miners having simply nothing to pay any rent, and being scarcely able to keep body and soul together, bethought them of the plan of our uncivilized ancestors, who made burrows in the earth to live in. The poor fellows scooped out some caves in the hillsides to shelter themselves and their families: in the night time one can see quite a long row of light, glimmering from these human dens. But the Government has now discovered that this return to primitive customs is not to be tolerated in the nineteenth century, and when our comrade wrote the wretched miners had received orders to turn out on a certain day.

We are glad to learn that they had the spirit left in them to be extremely indignant, and even disposed to fight for their miserable homes. The mining population is very revolutionary, the women even more so than the men. The sight of what their children suffer has forced the mothers to recognize the necessity of a change; and, besides, the truck system exists there in full force. The miners are obliged to buy their flour at the mine owner’s mills, at something like double the market price. If they do not do this, they are fined. Lately they struck for better wages, and got an increase of 1/8 a week. Little enough, but

it has given them the pluck to think about asking for something more, and we hope soon to hear better news of them.