Heroines of Peekskill Made Stirring History

By Claudia Jones

THE THOUSANDS OF WOMEN who formed part of the magnificent labor-progressive audience at the Peekskill Robeson concert on Sept. 5th, at Peekskill, again testify to the determination of American women to fight against the war and fascist danger. It testifies also to a truth which reaction fears, namely, that the participation of women brings strength and numbers to the emerging anti-fascist, anti-imperialist war coalition in our country.

The working class and progressive women went to Peekskill, some with their teen-age children and husbands. In so doing, they showed that side by side with their men—with their families, they will fight for peace and democratic rights, which the great Negro leader and people's artist Paul Robeson symbolizes. They showed, by their participation, that they are ready to stand up and be counted against all attempts of officially inspired "spontaneous" attacks that prevented, for example, the original Robeson concert from taking place.

Real heroines arose in the buses, when police and state troopers unconcernedly allowed the mob to ambush and stone the passengers.

•

WOMEN MANNED buses and helped to bring the children and other passengers to safety. With Paul Robeson at both concerts were such artists as Sylvia Kahn (brutally assaulted by the mob at the first Peekskill concert) and Hope Foye; the women were part of the magnificent defense of the people's forces, which sponsored the concert, and arranged to help guarantee the safety and protection of the people who attended the concert. That women weren't part of the magnificent young guard of veterans and trade unionists who stood on the hill doesn't mean that women didn't play a large and heroic role, or that their role was identical with that of the men.

One of the victims, Miriam Langbert, for example, received her eye injuries at the hands of the mob, backed by police collusion, because she alone stood in the bus urging the wavering driver to stay at his post and to speed the people through Strawberry Road to safety.

A 19-year-old girl, Nina Phillips, whose finger was amputated, was the one in her bus who calmed the victims, holding close to her own heart the fact that she was injured until all passengers were brought to safety.

FRANCES SMITH, Negro woman trade unionist of Local 6, Hotel and Club Employes Union, who sustained a head injury from a huge stone, gave leadership in helping to guarantee the safety and protection of the people in her bus, when the attack came following the concert by a frenzied mob which desperately and unsuccessfully sought to cancel out the great anti-fascist victory for free speech demonstrated in the unprecedented response of 25,000 people to this concert.

A granddaughter of the nation's suffrage leader (Elizabeth Cady Stanton, whose statute stands in Washington, D.C.), Mrs. Nora Stanton Barney, who virtually fought the police-backed mob with her own hands on her way to her car, was assaulted by the mob, who jeered her, even as they jeered the brave women who militantly fought for the right to vote.

These and numerous other heroic examples testify to something else. It shows that here in America, as in Nazi Germany when fascism was on the rise, part of the ideological mentality which stamped the mobs, from which the fascists recruited man and woman power, was their racist bias. This racist bias, directed in the U. S. first against the Negro people, included as its target the Jewish people, the youth and women.

•

WE SAW HERE, on the side of the mob, the callous contempt of women and children. We saw here, on the side of the mob, women too, their faces revealing political backwardness, anti-Negro, anti-Semitic, religious prejudices and downright ignorance, hurling stones with sadistic glee at busloads of children, elderly women and men. We saw the face of fascism stamped on the face of one bourgeois woman who drove by our bus marked as target by its shattered glass, miles away from Strawberry road, coldly saying: "I'm glad it happened."

Many felt, for the first time, even as do Rosa Lee Ingram, and the widow of the lynched Negro Robert Mallard, Mrs. Amy Mallard, what it is to feel the cold terror from lynchers who cry for blood of defenseless Negro women, children and men because of their determination to fight for freedom, and to associate themselves with ideas that stand for peace, security and equality, as symbolized by Paul Robeson.

Many see more clearly today that those who resort to violence are "the people in glass houses who shouldn't throw stones"—they, who are responsible for the unpunished lynchings, police brutality, the loyalty oaths, the persecution of Communists and progressives—the ruling class itself.

Many see that only if the people themselves defend the Bill of Rights and the Constitution is it possible to smash fascist terror and the threat of war.

•

NOT FEAR THEN, but courageous determination was the result of this baptism of struggle for thousands of women, men and children. In the communities, as in Kings County, women who never spoke before, never before participated in political activity, are speaking on streetcorners, bringing the Peekskill events to the community. In the established organizations of Jewish and Negro women, calls for greater unity of Negro and Jewish women are being voiced.

This unity of Negro and Jewish women can and should be enhanced. It can help to lay the basis for the unity of women of all nationalities.

In all of these protests, progressive forces, and particularly women, will not fail to draw proper conclusions, that the breakdown of law and order in Peekskill occurred because lynch terror, anti-Semitic attacks, brutal assaults are sanctioned by the Truman Administration, in which Democrats and Republicans are joined to hasten the American people onto the disastrous path of war with all its attendant anti-Communist hysteria, witch-hunts, loyalty oaths and persecution of Communists, and the drive to outlaw the Communist Party.

Let the events of Peekskill be a clarion call to the masses of women who love democracy and civil rights to unite and act now for peace, civil rights and democracy. Let them, as they act in support of demands for punishment for the guilty, arrest of all county and state officials guilty, prosecution of KKK revival, understand and protest also against attempts to outlaw the Communist Party, whose leadership reaction fears, even as it fears the democratic exercise of civil rights by the masses of people.