# The Bill Of Rights In Danger!

The Meaning Of The Minneapolis Convictions

by GEORGE E. NOVACK foreword by JAMES T. FARRELL

Author of "Studs Lonigan," etc.

Why is this case so important for Civil Liberties?
Who instigated the Minneapolis Prosecution?
How does the Smith Act gag Free Speech?
How do these Convictions Violate the Bill of Rights?
How can further Labor Prosecutions result from this case?

5 cents

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# 18 DEFENDANTS CONVICTED IN THE MINNEAPOLIS CASE

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National Secretary, SWP

GRACE CARLSON

Minnesota Organizer, SWP

JAKE COOPER

Minneapolis truckdriver

OSCAR COOVER

Minneapolis Organizer, SWP

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Local 544-CIO Organiser

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MINNEAPOLIS CASE

## by JAMES T. FARRELL

Noted novelist, author of "Studs Lonigan," etc.

On the 150th Anniversary of the Bill of Rights, the defense and preservation of civil liberties has become a paramount issue. Now more than ever, the priceless political rights guaranteed in the First Amendment of the American Constitution must remain operative. In peace or in war, when the right of free speech is destroyed, public life becomes rigid. Thinking turns into sheer routine. Artistic creation is driven into feeble channels of escapism. The rich spiritual, intellectual and artistic resources of the human spirit are dried up at their very source. These are truisms; but they are truisms that cannot now be repeated too often.

The names of Holmes and Brandeis are among the most honored in American legal history; but their words are not as respected as are their names. For it is clear that they had in mind a period such as the present one when they enunciated their theory of "a clear and present danger." In the Minneapolis case, this theory was abandoned; for it, the prosecution substituted one of indirect causation. Such a theory is a parallel to the Japanese notion of "dangerous thoughts." Once this is established as the law of the land, all thinking will become dangerous. In place of thinking, we will be allowed only to quote; and even quotation will be dangerous. The convictions obtained at Minneapolis are, to my mind, a clear and present danger to the Bill of Rights.

On this issue, the liberal magazine The Nation, has already sounded an alarm. In an editorial, appearing after the outbreak of war between this country and Japan, it declared: "We believe that all progressives of whatever political orientation must join in the defense of the Minneapolis defendants or permit the establishment of a precedent that may some day be used against them." The Minneapolis convictions were based on the Smith Act. It is a law in open contradiction to the Bill of Rights which proclaims that "Congress shall make no law...abridging freedom of speech..." In consequence, the Minneapolis case has today become the crucial one in the struggle which we must make for the preservation of civil liberties.

To destroy freedom of speech is to admit implicitly that one has lost faith in the great masses of the people. Instead of confidence in the masses of the common people whose ancestors were responsible for the Bill of Rights, one substitutes an elite. On them is placed all responsibility for continuing the succession of ideas which alone can give us the intellectual resources for the creation of a civilization, a culture, that is truly human. On December 15th, 1941, I am not prepared to sacrifice this faith.

That is why I assert that the question of civil liberties is of such paramount importance now. Many years ago, the courageous French novelist, Emile Zola, boldly and confidently proclaimed that the truth is on the march. Since then, oppression has spread over nation after nation. But in the face of every oppression, it is our duty to do what Zola tried to do—to keep the truth on the march. That we cannot do unless men are allowed publicly, honestly, seriously to think, to express their ideas, to defend their convictions. When Socrates stood on trial for his life, he told his judges that "the unexamined life is not worth living." These words of Socrates are as profoundly significant today as they were when he uttered them. Allow me to repeat—"the unexamined life is not worth living..."

(Read at New York Mass Meeting of the Civil Rights Defense Committee on December 15, 1941, 150th Anniversary of the Bill of Rights.)

# THE BILL OF RIGHTS IN DANGER

## by GEORGE E. NOVACK

On December 1st, 1941, after a five-week trial, eighteen men and women were found guilty by a Federal Grand Jury in Minneapolis, Minnesota of "conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the U. S. Government." A week later, twelve defendants were given 16-month prison sentences and six were sentenced to terms of a year and a day.

Among those convicted were the national leaders of the Socialist Workers Party and the officers of Motor Transport and Allied Workers Industrial Union Local 544-CIO.

The American Civil Liberties Union has called the Minneapolis case the "most important civil liberties issue in many years." The New York newspaper *PM* characterized it as "labor's first cause celebre of the Second World War." It is widely recognized as the crucial test of civil liberties in the present period.

This can be seen by the lineup of forces on both sides of the case. Approval of the prosecution came only from the conservative press, some Democratic and Republican leaders, certain reactionary AFL officials, and the Communist Party. The Government's action has been vigorously condemned as a serious threat to civil liberties and organized labor by the CIO, Labor's Non-Partisan League, the United Auto Workers, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Workers Defense League, the Union for Democratic Action, The Nation, the New Republic and many other outstanding labor organizations and liberal spokesmen.

Typical of this protest is the following comment from an editorial in *The Nation* of December 13th, 1941: "The prosecution and conviction are challenges to every believer in civil liberties. They are an example of the very thing the Bill of Rights sought to make impossible—the imprisonment of men not for what they did, but for what they thought and said."

Free speech, civil liberties and labor's rights—cherished possessions of the American people—have been placed in peril by the Minneapolis convictions. Why and how did this trial happen?

#### BACKGROUND OF THE PROSECUTION

This prosecution arose directly out of the influence of the Socialist Workers Party—the Trotskyists—in the Minneapolis trade union movement. Members and sympathizers with Socialist Workers Party policies have played a leading role in Teamsters Local 544. Local 544 has been the spearhead and stronghold of the most militant and progressive sections of the labor movement in Minneapolis and the Northwest, ever since it consolidated itself as a powerful union organization by winning a series of strenuously fought strikes in 1934. These strikes made the Minneapolis Teamsters Union and its leadership nationally famous.

Under the inspiration and guidance of the leaders of 544, Minneapolis in a few years became transformed from the leading open shop city in the U. S. to one of the most strongly organized union centers. The average wage of the Minneapolis truck drivers, helpers and warehousemen was raised from 18¢ an hour in 1933 to a minimum of over seventy cents an hour in 1939. Local 544's leadership also initiated the bringing in of over 200,000 over-the-road drivers into the Teamsters International under a closed shop 11-state contract signed in 1938.

From 1934 on, there was constant friction between Local 544's leadership and Daniel J. Tobin, President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Tobin publicly attacked the 1934 strikes in red-baiting language; thereafter there was at best an uneasy truce between him and the militant unionists of 544. Their hostility came to a head the first week in June 1941, when a Committee of 544 leaders was summoned to appear before a meeting of the Teamsters International Executive Board in Washington to answer charges of "radicalism" filed against them. There Tobin asked the 544 delegation to request his appointment of a dictator-receiver over the union, with absolute powers, including the power to expel anyone.

Local 544 rejected this proposal. At a regular membership meeting held on June 9th, the nearly 4,000 members present by almost unanimous vote decided to disaffiliate from the AFL and join the CIO. Other teamster locals in Minneapolis and the Northwest took or contemplated similar action.

On June 13th, four days after Local 544 voted to join the CIO, Mr. Tobin sent a telegram to President Roosevelt, saying that the transfer of Local 544 was "indeed a regrettable and dangerous con-

dition," urging that the men later indicted "be in some way prevented from pursuing this dangerous course." (N. Y. Times, June 14, 1941)

Upon receipt of this message, Stephen Early, President Roosevelt's secretary, issued a statement from the White House saying in part: "When I advised the President of Mr. Tobin's representations this morning, he asked me immediately to have the government departments and agencies interested in this matter notified, and to point out that this is no time, in his opinion, for labor unions, local or national, to begin raiding one another..." (N. Y. Times, June 14, 1941)

Which government agencies were "notified" became clear within a few days after Tobin's appeal and the President's statement, when FBI agents raided the Socialist Workers Party branch offices in Minneapolis and St. Paul on June 27th. On July 15th, the Federal Grand Jury indicted 29 people on charges of "seditious conspiracy." All the leading officers of Local 544-CIO as well as the national leaders of the SWP were among those indicted. Sixteen were held on \$3,500 bail each, 10 on \$2,500 each, while three were released on their own recognizance. Bail was provided by the Civil Rights Defense Committee and the CIO.

#### MOTIVES BEHIND THE PROSECUTION

The record thus shows that one motive behind the prosecution was to assist Tobin in his struggle against the rival CIO union for control of the Minneapolis teamsters. The CIO immediately charged that the Department of Justice had moved against the defendants as a political favor to Tobin, who headed the Democratic Labor Committee in the 1940 presidential campaign.

In its letter of protest to Attorney-General Biddle on August 21, the American Civil Liberties Union stated: "It is reasonable to conclude that the action taken by the Government arose from the President's reaction to Mr. Tobin's request." The Attorney-General has maintained it was simply a coincidence that the arrests followed Tobin's appeal and the President's statement.

The intervention of the Federal authorities on behalf of one labor organization in its controversy with another sets a dangerous precedent; it constitutes a rank violation of the independence of the trade unions from governmental interference in the internal affairs of the labor movement.

There is a second motive for this case. The political basis for the prosecution is evident in the indictment of the Socialist Workers Party members. This is a revolutionary Marxist party whose views, of course, are fundamentally opposed to those of the present administration. "It seems reasonable to conclude," said the American Civil Liberties Union, "that the Government injected itself into an inter-union controversy in order to promote the interests of the one side which supported the administration's foreign and domestic policies."

By instituting this repressive action against the Socialist Workers Party, solely because of its political principles, the administration clearly violated the free-speech provisions of the Constitution.

#### THE UNION DEFENSE GUARD

What evidence did the government claim to possess that the defendants had actually plotted its armed overthrow? Nothing but the formation of the Minneapolis Union Defense Guard three years before by members of Local 544. This Union Defense Guard had been organized to protect the Union headquarters and members against the fascist Silver Shirts who had swarmed into Minneapolis and were threatening violence against Local 544.

After the Silver Shirts, intimidated by this display of determination, had slunk away, the Guard ceased functioning. It last functioned in December 1940 when Guard members acted as ushers at the Children's Christmas Party sponsored by the Minneapolis Teamsters Joint Council!

It was these 200 Union Defense Guards, according to the government, who were conspiring, training and collecting arms and ammunition to take over the government! This charge was a pure and simple frame-up. The only rebellion of which the leaders of 544 were guilty, as *The Nation* pointed out, was that of leaving the AFL for the CIO.

In his Sept. 4, 1941, reply to the American Civil Libertles Union letter of protest, Attorney-General Biddle declared: "I am confident that it (arming the workers to overthrow the government) will be supported by the evidence." But the evidence produced at the trial was so flimsy and fantastic that this count in the indictment was completely thrown out by the jury's verdict.

#### THE TRIAL BEGINS

The trial of the 28 began on October 27th in the Federal District Court at Minneapolis. Matthew M. Joyce was the presiding judge; the Federal prosecutors were Victor A. Anderson and Assistant Attorney-General Henry A. Schweinhaut. Several of the defendants had confronted Anderson before in the same courtroom during the trials of WPA workers who struck for higher relief in 1939. Ironically enough, Schweinhaut formerly had been head of the Civil Liberties Division of the Department of Justice which had been set up to guard precisely against such violations of the Bill of Rights as the prosecution he was now directing!

Defense counsel were not permitted to question prospective jurors; only the judge could direct the questions. Most of the jurors chosen came from the rural counties outside of Minneapolis. The jury did not include a single person who had ever been a trade unionist.

In his opening statement to the jury, Anderson explicitly declared that, even if it could not be proven that the defendants had actually taken up arms against the government, they could nevertheless be found guilty of "seditious conspiracy." In other words, the defendants could be convicted, not for anything they did, but solely for expressing their opinions. Anderson thus made it plain that the constitutional rights of free speech, free press and freedom of assembly were also on trial.

No less ominous was the anti-labor bias of Anderson's charges against the defendants which reached its climax when he accused them of the "crimes" of urging workers to distrust arbitration and to demand ever-higher wages.

#### THE GOVERNMENT'S CASE

The government brought 37 witnesses to the stand. Twenty-two were either agents of Tobin and on his payroll or supporters of Tobin's fight against the leaders of 544-CIO. Two of the witnesses were FBI agents and one was an employee of the Associated Industries, a reactionary employers' association in Minneapolis. The other twelve witnesses were of minor significance. Thus the bulk of the evidence against the defendants was provided by Tobin.

The chief government witnesses testified that they had held conversations with one or another of the defendants. These conversations had two unvarying characteristics: 1. They were private

and therefore had to remain uncorroborated; 2. Although many subjects were discussed, the witness could usually recall only one—that the defendants had said something about their intentions to overthrow the government by force.

The government also introduced into evidence over 150 exhibits, consisting of official documents and articles published by the Socialist Workers Party together with many of the best-known works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. All these publications had been openly distributed and publicly sold. Among them was the Communist Manifesto; the government charged that this 93-year-old Socialist classic, burned by Hitler's regime and banned by Mussolini and the Mikado, is likewise illegal and subversive literature in the United States!

Several of the government's own witnesses praised the character of the defendants. Thus Thomas Smith, ex-Secretary-Treasurer of the Omaha Teamsters Union, testified that he joined the Socialist Workers Party because "I saw the good work of Local 544; their leaders were labor-minded; they helped out the smaller locals and were for the poor, so I figured that if the SWP produced those kind of people, it was good enough for me."

Although one of the main counts in the indictment charged the defendants with fomenting insubordination in the armed forces, the government did not produce a single member of the armed forces to substantiate this. Under the Smith Act, as interpreted by the prosecution however, it need not be proven that any soldier or sailor ever read any of their statements or acted upon them for the defendants to be found guilty. The mere expression of criticism or publication of socialist ideas are considered in themselves proof of incitement to insubordination. Under this law CIO President Philip Murray could be indicted for referring to "widespread and wholly justified discontent in the Army." (CIO News, Nov. 17, 1941.) Negro leaders could likewise be jailed for protesting against discrimination in the army.

Attorney-General Biddle had stated that the Department of Justice acted independently of Daniel J. Tobin in promoting the prosecution. The government's own witnesses, however, exposed the collaboration between Tobin and the FBI.

Under cross-examination by defense counsel, Herbert Harris, a Tobin lieutenant, revealed that the Committee of 100 (Tobin's agency in the fight to gain control of Local 544) was organized

in consultation with the FBI. "When the fight started in the union", said Harris, he was instructed by Tommy Williams, leader of the Committee of 100, to admit FBI agent Thomas Perrin to its first meeting at Hotel Nicollet. Harris testified that Perrin sent him to Karl Skoglund, ex-President and Trustee of Local 544, with an offer to obtain citizenship papers for Skoglund if he "would break with the Dunnes and side with the Committee of 100." After Skoglund refused, he was not only indicted along with the others, but later arrested and held for deportation.

#### TESTIMONY OF THE DEFENSE

Whereas the government took three weeks to present its case, the defense used only four days for its refutation. Chief witness for the defense was James P. Cannon, National Secretary of the Socialist Workers Party and one of the 28 on trial. Cannon gave a comprehensive and detailed exposition\* of the ideas and program of the Socialist Workers Party to disprove the distorted version attributed to the defendants by the prosecution.

Farrell Dobbs, Labor Secretary of the Socialist Workers Party, and Vincent Dunne, organizer of Local 544-CIO, explained the policies and activities of the Socialist Workers Party in the trade unions. Six union members briefly testified concerning the real functions of the Union Defense Guard. Grace Carlson refuted government testimony about certain statements ascribed to her.

Defense Attorney Albert Goldman summarized the arguments for the defense in his final speech\* which lasted ten hours. He outlined the main ideas of Marxism and thereby disproved the prosecution's charges that the defendants were engaged in a conspiratorial plot to overthrow the government by force or that the Socialist Workers Party advocates such violence. Marxists, he pointed out, believe that socialism can be achieved only by winning a majority of the people. He stated that the attempt to depict the Union Defense Guard as an armed band organized to overthrow the government was nothing but a frame-up. In addition Goldman showed that the case was a continuation of the factional struggle in the Teamsters Union and that the government initiated the prosecution to help Tobin's faction and to suppress a workers' party opposed to the administration's policies.

<sup>\*</sup>The official court records of Cannon's testimony and of Goldman's final argument have been published as two pamphlets by Pioneer Publishers, 116 University Place, N. Y. C., and are sold at 10c each.

#### THE JURY'S VERDICT

After considering the case for two and a half days, the jury brought in a verdict, acquitting all the defendants on the first count and finding eighteen guilty on the second count. Five of the original 28 defendants were cleared of all charges while five had previously been dismissed by the judge for lack of evidence against them. The jury recommended leniency for all defendants.

The defendants had been indicted on the first count under a law passed in 1861 during the Civil War, for use against the armed rebellion of the Confederacy. This statute was invoked to prove that the defendants actually conspired to forcibly overthrow the government, notably by the formation of the Union Defense Guard.

"The organization of the workers in a defense corps...," wrote Attorney-General Biddle to the American Civil Liberties Union on September 4th, 1941, "is clearly sufficient to remove the case from one involving expression of opinion." By acquitting the defendants on Count 1, the jury removed the last prop from Biddle's contention. The defendants were convicted not for any acts but solely because of beliefs they held and expressed. The issue of civil liberties, the violation of the Bill of Rights by this prosecution is now clear and unmistakable.

#### CONVICTED UNDER SMITH "GAG" ACT

The eighteen were found guilty of "conspiracy to advocate the overthrow of the government by force and violence" and "counseling insubordination in the armed forces." These are the first convictions under the Smith "Gag" Act of 1940, sponsored by Poll-Tax Representative Howard W. Smith, leader of the anti-labor bloc in Congress and author of the notorious Slave Labor Bill now pending. The Smith Act is the most reactionary statute in the U. S. Code. During the debates in Congress Representative Geyer of California said: "This bill is an attempt to put an end to real democracy. It is an attempt to break the labor movement."

"It is enough to make Thomas Jefferson turn over in his grave," said Representative Martin of Colorado, "it is without precedent in the history of labor legislation. It is an invention of intolerance contrary to every principle of democracy."

The American Civil Liberties Union pleaded with President Roosevelt to veto the Smith Act and predicted that it "would become

an instrument of oppression against unpopular minorities and organized labor."

The Smith Act is the first Federal peacetime law since the infamous Alien & Sedition Acts of 1798 which makes mere advocacy of ideas a felony. Virtually every labor and liberal organization, including the CIO, the AFL and American Civil Liberties Union, has attacked the Smith Act as a clear violation of the Bill of Rights.

The Smith "Gag" Act makes it a penal offense to advocate any revolutionary change in the government or to criticize conditions in the armed forces. It could easily be made to include the CIO Convention's protest against training soldiers in strike-breaking tactics or protests against Jim Crow practices in the armed forces.

The conviction of the 18 under this law not only endangers freedom of thought and expression in the United States but sets a precedent for possible prosecutions of other trade union leaders. Expert legal authorities have questioned the constitutionality of the Smith Act.

#### THE APPEAL

The Civil Rights Defense Committee, in conjunction with the American Civil Liberties Union, is appealing the convictions to the Circuit Court of Appeals and to the Supreme Court. The most significant question to be raised on the appeal is the constitutionality of the Smith Act. Defense attorneys have indicated that other questions will also be raised, such as the sufficiency of the indictment and the sufficiency of the evidence to prove the indictment.

During the trial the defense contended that the "clear and present danger" doctrine should be applied to the Smith Act. This famous doctrine, formulated by Justices Holmes and Brandeis, asserts that utterances should not be punished unless they create "a clear and present" danger to the government or armed forces. The applicability of this doctrine will also be raised in the appeal.

The National CIO, through its chief counsel, Lee Pressman, will participate in the appeal by filing a brief covering those issues in the case which affect the CIO.

#### **NATION-WIDE PROTEST**

The prosecution and convictions have brought forth widespread protests. In December the New Jersey State CIO Industrial Union

Council, representing over 250,000 workers, adopted a resolution which "condemns the convictions and protests the use of the FBI to interfere in the democratic procedure of the labor movement." The Smith Act, it declared, "is a dangerous weapon against labor and the democratic rights of the American people." Scores of similar resolutions have been passed by trade unions from Connecticut to California.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which has actively assisted the defense from the first, declared: "No more important issue of civil liberties in the courts has arisen in recent years," and will participate in the appeal.

The New Republic agreed that "this is one of the most serious issues involving civil liberties in many years. . . the precedent of conviction for opinion is a most disturbing and unfortunate one."

The New Leader pointed out that "an especially dangerous aspect of the conviction is their being convicted under the Smith Act of 1940 . . . It is a fateful move when persons are convicted on a virtual ex-post-facto basis."

The annual convention of the United Auto Workers in August 1941 pledged full support to Local 544 and unanimously protested against this use of the FBI "to oppress or harass any labor organization in the pursuit of their legitimate activities."

The Union for Democratic Action, the Workers Defense League, the General Defense Committee and many labor, progressive and religious organizations have condemned the prosecution in vigorous terms.

They have recognized that the convictions of the eighteen can become the forerunner of an "all-out" attack upon other trade unionists and minority groups.

#### WORK OF CIVIL RIGHTS DEFENSE COMMITTEE

The Civil Rights Defense Committee was organized in August 1941 to aid the defendants, to defend their rights, and to publicize the important issues involved in the Minneapolis case. Its National Committee includes prominent individuals from many fields of activity and with diverse political views. These labor, liberal, uni-

versity and religious leaders have united to defend the democratic and constitutional rights imperiled by this prosecution. The work of the Civil Rights Defense Committee has been endorsed by leading labor and civil liberties organizations.

Over thirty branches are active in enlisting support for the defense in their localities. Our Committee has provided bail, transportation and counsel for the defendants and financed their fiveweek trial. During the trial it set up a central commissary in Minneapolis to feed the 28 defendants and their families. These expenditures amounted to \$12,000.

The Civil Rights Defense Committee, in conjunction with the American Civil Liberties Union, is now engaged in appealing the convictions of the 18 to the higher courts. In addition to the heavy deficit incurred for the trial, we must raise money for printing the legal briefs and for attorney's expenses. Unless the government assumes this cost, we shall have to pay for printing the lengthy court record. We must also provide relief for needy families of jobless defendants who have been victimized because of their beliefs and activities in the labor movement. Estimated expenses may total \$15,000.

We ask moral and material support from every progressive organization and individual genuinely concerned with maintaining our democratic and constitutional rights. The convictions of the eighteen must be reversed. The Smith "Gag" Act must be repealed.

Let there be no blackout for the Bill of Rights in the United States!

#### This Pamphlet has been published by

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# EMERGENCY APPEAL

The Civil Rights Defense Committee needs \$15,000 to appeal the Minneapolis convictions and to test the constitutionality of the Smith "Gag" Act. We need your help in this fight for free speech and civil liberties. Make all checks payable to

### **CIVIL RIGHTS DEFENSE COMMITTEE**

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