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# Speech to the Court at the Time of Sentencing, February 20, 1919.

by J. Louis Engdahl

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Your Honor, this is a new experience which I am undergoing today. It is an experience new to my four comrades here with me, and to the still youthful Socialist Party of America.

But the effort put forth in this courtroom by organized government, to crush minority opinion through an attack on individuals is not a novelty in the broader experience of the International Socialist Movement, reaching as it does today into all the lands of the earth.

Soon it will be a full century during which our Cause has fed its best blood and thought to the “political prisons” of a decaying social order. History will remember that Siberia, a goodly part of a continent, was the penal colony for those who hoped and dared struggle for the new day.

What is of the past, therefore, for my comrades of Russia, and in other lands, now becomes a thing of the present for adherents of Socialism here in the United States — surely a fateful moment in the history of the republic. When forward movements ascent the altar of persecution their hour of triumph is near.

I am here, because I was the editor of *The American Socialist*, the official weekly publication of the Socialist Party.

When the world war came to America, and the nation was swept down into the valley of darkness, ignorance, and prejudice; into the blood crimsoned abyss of sorrow and suffering, this pa-

per sought, in its way, to continue to carry aloft the torch of truth, and light the rugged and sharply ascending way that leads towards the high goal of human emancipation.

The Socialist Party is the political organization of labor — growing and becoming strong with labor’s increasing intelligence. Its official publication, therefore, was the spokesman for the working class, and as such had the active and enthusiastic support of 100,000 dues paying members of the party, and the sympathy and encouragement of 1 million Socialist voters in the nation.

The capitalist daily newspapers only last week confessed that the United States now contains 30,000 millionaires, whereas, on the scarlet morning of war in August 1914, we had but 7,000. Before the sun had set upon slaughter’s unbridled feast, with the signing of a truce in November 1918, we had added 23,000 millionaires to the lists of our rich. More than four times as many millionaires in little more than four years.

Recently in this city [Chicago], Charles J. Hastings, president of the American Public Health Association, told 500 members of that organization assembled here, that 3 million children go hungry to school every morning in this, our bountiful land.

This revolting spectacle, the arrogant edifice of great wealth reared upon an unstable substructure

ture of hunger, broke upon my vision in all its varied horror many years ago. My aspirations for a better and more perfect civilization then found an abiding place in the International Socialist movement. Up to the present hour I have found no reason to waver in my faith. Every passing day strengthens my belief that the world's last slave class, the toilers in industry and the tillers of the soil, will soon win their long sought liberation through Socialism.

My mind could not conceive, during the early months of 1917, how a nation where less than one-half of one percent of the people own and control nine-tenths of the wealth, and struggling for more, could possibly wage a war "to make the world safe for democracy." The history of all ages has taught that the one-half of one percent have always, bitterly, with every means at their disposal, fought making the nations fit abiding places for the 99 and one-half percent. History will repeat itself and show that while the workers of Europe were overthrowing Kings, Emperors, Kaisers, and Tsars, 13 reigning families with an annual income ranging from \$2.5 million to \$60 million were tightening their already powerful grip upon the government and industry of the United States of America. Who is there that dares deny it?

I have nothing to retract, at this crucial moment in my life. No valid argument presents itself why I should change any statement I have made, either through the printed or the spoken word. Time will prove the truth of all that appeared in the columns of *The American Socialist*. Even America will then gladly accept what it now blindly condemns.

It was a capitalist war. It was born of the imperialistic ambitions of money-mad nations in the grip of the profit system. No nation can join in the struggle to create a free world until it has liberated itself from the social system that breeds both wealth and want, war, and woe.

It was with considerable interest that I lis-

tened to that part of the court's charge to the jury in which it was pointed out that the jury system is the best vehicle for obtaining justice that has so far been achieved. This, however, is not a syllable in its favor.

Throughout the centuries we have always had a passing social system sitting in judgment on a new and dawning order of society. Yet, in all this passage of time, there has not been conceived a system of justice by which an old order can judge a new without blindness, prejudice, and hostility. The capitalist system has shown itself just as blind, prejudiced, and hostile as all its predecessors. Ancient barbarism was not less brutal in its war of self-preservation against the coming of Christianity, than is the futile struggle of capitalism against the rapid approach of Socialism.

As editor of *The American Socialist* and as a member of the Socialist Party, I sought to do my part in preparing for and hastening the dawn of Socialism — social, industrial, and political democracy for all peoples. I based my right, and the right of my comrades, to legally and peacefully struggle toward this end, on that part of "The Declaration of Independence — 1776" which reads:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its power in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Another bulwark of this right is to be found in the First Article of the Bill of Rights of the National Constitution, which reads in part:

Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

When our revolutionary forefathers took the power to abridge liberty out of the hands of Congress, it certainly did not lodge that power with courts and juries. To maintain itself in power in this country, the profit system, operating through the national government, swept aside the lofty ideals of the Declaration of Independence, and dethroned the guarantees of the National Constitution.

For the time being extreme intolerance has usurped the places of these ideals and guarantees. This usurpation made possible the suppression of Socialist publications, among them *The American Socialist*. The inevitable sequel was my indictment, trial, and conviction, with my comrades, as in so many other cases, for having sought to enjoy the rights of free men while struggling to bring about the third great change in our nation's progress toward higher ideals — its third revolution.

We, who are before this court today for sentence, find comfort in knowing that the crimes charged against us were those also visited upon America's revolutionary fathers of 1776, who dared declare their political independence of England's king, and who had the hardihood to fight for it through seven bitter years of supreme sacrifice. This was the nation's first revolution and it ended victoriously.

Even as we suffer here, for daring to strike at the chains of modern wage slavery, so the abolitionists of a century ago, suffered for seeking to end chattel slavery. But the right prevailed, although the land was turned into a charnel house, by the foes of the future, for five endless years. The second revolution thus triumphed and black labor was set free.

King George III, of England, clutching his

imperial throne, could no grant justice to the 13 colonies, demanding political liberty. The negro slaveholders of the South, and the institution for which they stood, could not give just and fair consideration to the demands of the new order, in which all men, black as well as white, should be free.

And the present capitalist system, now facing the third revolution in the tireless evolution of our nation's life, is no more capable of honest judgment than Britain's political despotism or the South's black slavocracy proved to be in their day. So here we are.

I entertain in my mind no enmity toward mortal man. I bear no malice toward court, jury, or prosecution.

But my entire being revolts at a system of justice that pledges 12 men to ignorance concerning a philosophy that is now determining the destinies of all the peoples upon earth, at the same time asking them to sit in impartial judgment upon it. Not one among all the men called for jury service in this court proceeding had ever made even a fleeting study of Socialism. All of them, without exception, had had their every thought and viewpoint cast in the moulds determined by the present social system. Who can blame them for their stupidity? Insanity to think that the impressions of a lifetime could be swept away by a few days' conflict of ideas in a courtroom.

What can be said of the prosecution! Coercion, intimidation, misrepresentation, and falsification — all that, and more, is expected as a matter of course. Our trial, therefore, was no disappointment. No ends were too mean, no act too low, if it only lead to a conviction.

The foul depths to which the servile tools of capitalism can descend, aping the antics of their predecessors in all times, were revealed in this trial when the prosecution sought to besmirch and blacken the world-inspiring record of the Russian Revolution by repeating the exploded falsehood that it had been subsidized by the now obliterated

ated German Imperial Government. And German imperialism, with its puppet Kaiser, when that lie was repeated here in the courtroom, had already been consigned to oblivion for two months, while the irresistible forces of Soviet Russia continue to carry the great truths of our Socialist philosophy to other lands, in order that all may be touched by its uplifting hand.

Need I, in this fleeting moment plucked from the ceaseless march of time, renew my allegiance, my common brotherhood with even the poorest and most lowly of the world's working class. In my mind there is no fear of prison horrors. All my thoughts are with the toilers everywhere. Wherever they are — in the shops, the factories, on the railroads crossing the land, or the ships that sail the seas, down in the mines of coal and metal, or out in the open tilling the soil — I know that they are thinking and pondering the time when they shall all be free — the men, the women, and the children of today's enslaving industry.

I am not the enemy of the common soldier. I would only assist in the passing of the system that needs and therefore breeds soldiers; a social system that during these nearly five years has outraged and trampled in the mire every precept of the Christian civilization we boast of.

I have committed no crime against the right. Right and justice will triumph in time. Already their common standard, as our counsel has so ably told in addressing both court and jury, floats victoriously over half the white people of the earth.

The New Day dawns! Its glow sweeps westward and illuminates new lands, awakening the workers of Great Britain, France, Italy, and the lesser nations. We shall live to see its radiant hue span the broad Atlantic and light America from its eastern to its western shore.

As the gates of prison, therefore, with threat and promise, slowly creep ajar to receive me and my comrades, I will add my voice again to the hundreds of millions of other voices, lifted in uni-

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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