
Wake Up, Americans!

by William F. Kruse

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Suppose that your mother, living in a country supposedly governed by public opinion, had expressed her opinions on the merits of some political question — and that she had been arrested by her political opponents, convicted by a picked jury of sworn enemies, and sentenced to spend 5 years of sweatshop slavery in a prison factory — what would you do?

Suppose that some minister or priest or religious layman of your acquaintance believed so firmly in his gospel that he denied the right of any government to pass amendments thereto — and that for this “crime” he had been maltreated and beaten almost to death in an army training camp, and finally, because of disobedience of an army order which he felt was opposed to his religion or conscience, was court-martialed and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment — what would you do?

Suppose that you were a union man and that your organization possessed a brave and trusted leader, who had ever been true to the workers’ interests, and suppose that because of such activity the bosses and employers’ organizations had him railroaded to jail on the trumped-up charge of being “unpatriotic” — what would you do?

Suppose that there was a great election struggle between a party in power and a party out of power, and that to stay in power the one group simply jailed their opponents, suppressed their newspapers, broke up their meetings, and made it impossible to carry on an opposition campaign — what would your answer be?

You Would Protest.

Of course you would protest! Even though you did not believe as these victims of persecution did — you would protest against such treatment because you would know that it gave the lie to your country’s every pretension of democracy, that it would discredit your land with all, at home and abroad.

All these things and many more have happened in this country.

Kate Richards O’Hare, the mother of four fine children, just at an age when they most need a mother’s care, was a gifted writer, lecturer, and social service worker. She delivered a lecture in North Dakota just as she had done in thousands of other communities in this country, and was “framed up” and convicted and is now toiling at breakneck pace and under slave-like conditions 9 hours a day in a government overall factory in the prison at Jefferson City, Mo., to which she was sentenced for 5 years. And her four young children, young Americans, born and bred here, wonder when their mother will be returned to them, wonder that a free country can let such things be. Their mother! Imprisoned for thinking differently from the party in power. It might be your mother — what are you going to do about it?

Rev. C.H. Waldron, Rev. Daniel Gerdes, Rev. H.M. Hendricksen, and other ministers of many denominations, as well as hundreds of laymen, are in prison or under sentence today because they deny the right of any man to strike out

of the Ten Commandments the fifth one, “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” Nor do they admit its application only to retail killing called “murder” rather than the wholesale slaughter called “war.” They are in prison or in danger or prison because their religion is different from that of the party in power. Is this compatible with a constitution that recognizes freedom of conscience as a cornerstone of liberty? What are you going to do about it?

William D. Haywood, chosen spokesman of a large group of American laboring men, together with hundreds of other members, organizers, and officials of the Industrial Workers of the World, was arrested and convicted under the Espionage Act. In these cases, as in the case of other political prisoners, they were not charged with committing any criminal act against persons or property, but were convicted entirely on account of their utterances and activities in their advocacy of industrial unionism and the legitimate conduct of their organization affairs. It was not these hundreds of men that unflinchingly took these outrageous verdicts who were condemned, but the great body of workers whose unfaltering hatred of capitalist oppression had roused the latent fear of the exploiters of men and made every individual member a mark for persecution.

It May Be You Next.

Yesterday it was Haywood and the IWW. Today the same fate threatens members and officials of the AF of L in the steel and coal strikes. Tomorrow it may be the officials of your union — it may be yourself. As long as there is a single political prisoner in the United States, no citizen is safe from the jail and the gallows. What are you going to do about it?

The Socialist Party is the political opponent of the Democrat-Republican combination now in office. It differs with them on many questions of

principle and policy. It differed with them on many questions of war and conducting the war. It used political propaganda methods to win the confidence of the American people, as is consistent with American institutions and traditions. Thus alone is free representative government of the people, for the people, and by the people maintainable.

But its opponents in power did not propose that the American people should listen to the Socialist appeal for political support. They indicted and imprisoned hundreds of Socialist speakers and distributors of Socialist political literature. They drew no distinction between those of renown and those of obscurity — they sought to silence the voice of political opposition by recourse to the methods of the Tsar, the Sultan, and the Spanish Inquisition.

Eugene V. Debs, thrice candidate for the highest office in this republic and recipient of the suffrage of almost 1 million voters, made a political speech in an Ohio town and was convicted of sedition by a handpicked jury of aged landowners. Debs, the idol of progressive workers of America, 63 years old, sentenced to die in a felon’s cell because of his prowess as an educator and his consequent menace to the politicians now in control of our government.

Five national officials of the Socialist Party, one of them elected by his neighbors to represent them in Congress, were likewise persecuted and convicted, and sentenced to serve 20 years each in the federal penitentiary.†

Almost 1,500 political prisoners in a political democracy! Most of them convicted of “sedition”! Sedition as a crime in a country supposedly ruled by public opinion! Can anything be more preposterous? “Sedition” is the “crime” of stirring up people’s minds (public opinion) into discontent with the king, or nobility, or administration of a country. Is it wrong to be dissatisfied with the

†- Author William Kruse, head of the Socialist Party’s youth section, the Young Peoples’ Socialist League (YPSL), was included among this group of 5 Socialist officials. These convictions were ultimately overturned on appeal on the grounds of judicial prejudice.

work or policy of elected servants of the people? Is this a crime? Perhaps in an autocracy, yes, but in a country supposed to be politically free?

Wake Up.

Wake up, Americans! Your institutions are in danger. Political freedom is being destroyed by those who at any cost, even to the destruction of the republic and its civil liberties, would maintain themselves in political and economic power. As long as any man or woman can be imprisoned for “unorthodox” political opinions, you yourselves are not safe — your turn may come next. Tomorrow you may think for yourselves and thereby be branded a criminal. Your only hope of peaceable progress and change lies in the freest discussion of public problems.

Wake up! American autocrats are trying to introduce Russian tsarist conditions. Already we see the suppression of civil liberties and the spectacle of the leaders of the political opposition jailed at the whim of their opponents, the administration. Already it is proposed to use the Philippines as an American Siberia for political undesirables. Already it is proposed to create a huge professional standing army of 500,000 men, backed by a conscript system of 2 million more in training and reserve — in peacetime and wartime carrying out the worst principles of the Prussian system which you sought to destroy. Already we are infested by a network of secret police, already the “Black Hun-

dreds” of the reactionaries are mobilizing.† There is danger here. Preserve American conditions if you would progress by means of orderly political and economic means.

Protest against the imprisonment of men for their political or religious or economic opinions. Protest against the suppression of civil liberties. Nowhere else in the world, save in reactionary Japan, is there such vindictive and relentless punishment of political offenders. Shall we travel in this company? While a single one of these men and women are in jail, all claims of democracy are a hollow pretense. Wake up, Americans, and redeem your land from the shame that has fallen upon it. Join in the demand now voiced by millions:

“Mr. President! Let all political prisoners go! Let them go now! The war is over and aggressions against civil freedom that might be tolerated in wartimes are reprehensible now. Get us back into the company of civilized nations. England, Germany, Italy, Austria, France, Canada — are all releasing their wartime political victims. When will we do likewise? We, the American people, command you, Mr. President, let our people go!”

Send this message to the President over your signature. Send it to your Congressmen and Senators, to your newspaper, your labor union, your church, your club. Help in the good work.

The existence of a single political prisoner in this country should make every real American bow his head in shame.

†- Reference is to the anti-semitic Right Wing vigilantes who stirred up acts of mob violence in Tsarist Russia.

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