
The Background of Bolshevism

by John Reed

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On January 15th, in the year of Our Lord 1919, and the 142nd year of American Independence, two months after the end of the War, Dr. Morris Zucker, American citizen, was convicted on 4 counts under the Espionage Act, in the Federal Court of Brooklyn.

According to *The World*, the speech for which he was convicted, which was a protest against the soldiers' attacks on Socialist meetings, contained the following treasonable sentences:

"America is becoming today what Russia used to be in the old, old days..."

"Here in America they may tear the red flag from our hands, but they only implant it more firmly in our hearts..."

"While I confess, my friends, I claimed exemption in America, if I were in Germany or Russia I would only be too proud to fight in the first trench lines..." (i.e., in a Revolutionary Army).

"Yes, it is might that we are after..."

"Next Thanksgiving Day we will celebrated the fact that the United States recognizes the red flag as the flag of democracy..."

Assistant District Attorney Buchner, in demanding a heavy sentence, gave as his pretext a desire to check the spread of Bolshevism.

In his argument, Prosecutor Buchner is reported to have said: "Native Americans never had occasion to protest against the Espionage Act, insofar as the right of free speech is concerned."

That is a lie — a deliberate lie. Eugene V. Debs, native America, had occasion to protest

against the Espionage Act; Bill Haywood, native America, had such occasion; all Socialists, native-born or foreign-born, all champions of the working class in this country, of whatever origin, have had occasion to protest against the Espionage Act, which has been used by the capitalist class, through the agencies of our government, to wage the class struggle and which even now, after the ending of the War, is so used.

Let us examine the statements of Dr. Zucker one by one. What is the difference between the pogroms against Socialist meetings, instituted by our money-patriots, with the aid of returning soldiers, and the pogroms instituted by similar elements in Tsarist Russia against the Jews? The suppression of political meetings, the censorship of political opinions in the press, the arbitrary arrests, the irresponsible menaces of the police, these do resemble conditions in Tsarist Russia. And why should such a comparison be considered seditious, when the Allied armies are supporting in Russia those forces which desire to restore the Tsar?

"Here in America they tear the red flag from our hands—" That is also true, and should be cause for self-congratulation to those who are attempting to "check the spread of Bolshevism." That "they only plant it more firmly in our hearts" is also inevitably true, as the authorities would realize if they knew anything of the psychology of loyalty to symbols.

But they do not. They think, when with curses and the threat of punishment they force an

American to stand up when "The Star Spangled Banner" is played, that they have "planted it firmly in our hearts." And they also think that when they "tear the red flag from our hands," they are "checking the spread of Bolshevism." No, they are spreading Bolshevism.

Are men to be imprisoned for speaking the truth openly? Well, then, they will speak it privately, with far more effect because of that very fact.

Dr. Zucker then went on to say that he would rather fight in the Revolutionary Armies of a Socialist Republic than in the conscript armies of a Capitalist state. What Socialist will not agree with him, no matter in which country of the world he lives? Many times our useless rich, our idle parasites who live on the labor of others — for example, American heiresses who marry foreign nobles — have said that they preferred to be citizens of another country, and have expatriated themselves — and the kept press applauds....

This country of ours used to be the refuge for the world's oppressed. From Germany, Austria, Poland, Bohemia in '48 they came; from the Russia of the Tsar, from landlord-ridden Ireland; from Southern Italy, groaning under the weight of superstition and poverty; from the Asia of the Turk... The influx of new blood into "free America" reached hundreds of thousands every year. And yet when the war broke out we discovered to our astonishment that lately most of these people had refused to become American citizens — had deliberately rejected the manifold "privileges" of American citizenship.

Why? Is it, as the National Security league alleges, because immigrants are "ignorant" of the advantages of American citizenship? Is it because they do not understand our "glorious institutions"? No, it is because they have been exploited and starved and clubbed and brutalized generally by the American industrial system and its agents, the American police and the American courts. It is for this reason that foreigners come here to make

money, to save for a few years and accumulate a little sum upon which they could not live if they remained in America, but upon which they can have a decent life when they return to their own "backward" lands.... For some time the tide of really valuable immigration has been setting homeward — and after the war, when in every European country some form of People's Government will rule, maybe — who knows? — even American workers will want to find a country where they have some voice in the government....

"Yes," said Dr. Zucker, "it is might we are after..."

This is true. The workers of the United States are now confronted with brute force, the naked force of the capitalist class, which does not even deign, itself, to obey the law. It has been proven that Mooney was convicted on perjured evidence,, deliberately manufactured by an official of the law who shamelessly did the will of corrupt financial interests — and Mooney is in prison for life. It is proven that the mine-owners of Bisbee and other Arizona towns deported into the desert, without any warrant of law, several thousand striking miners and their sympathizers, and even their legal representatives, and attempted to starve them there — and yet these bandits are freed from prosecution by officers of the government. It is proven that the great corporations, such as the Bethlehem Steel company, who took advantage of the war to make huge profits out of the government, now cynically refuse to perform the agreement they made with an agency of the United States government, the War Labor Board, concerning treatment of their workers. It is plain to everyone who reads the papers that the capitalist class of this country is dumping on the labor market, with absolute indifference to the widespread human misery which follows, hundreds of thousands of workers who surrendered their defensive power at the call of "patriotism."

We are still beset and bedeviled by half-official, half-private strikebreaking and spying or-

ganizations like the National Security League and the American Defense Society, who, now that there is no longer any pretext for pursuing “German agents,” turn their attention to “checking the spread of Bolshevism.”

Might is what these agencies have. Might is the sole weapon by which the capitalist class preserves its hegemony — the might of economic terrorism, the might of controlling the price of living necessities, the might of police and constabularies, expressed by the courts of criminal law.

It is usually the practice of Socialists and labor leaders convicted under the Espionage Act to praise the fairness of the court that tried them. I am inclined to believe that most stories of this sort are apocryphal. Any Socialist knows that under the dictatorship of the capitalist class in which we live, the courts of law are administered in the interests of the ruling class, and the law is interpreted according to those interests.

But, it will be answered, there is the jury system....

The jury system! Whoever heard of a Socialist knowingly drawn on a jury panel? And if he were, how many times do you remember a Socialist being permitted to sit on a jury in a political case against a worker? If a juryman admits to being a Socialist, he is challenged or excused “for cause.” This also applies to “social workers,” and indeed to anyone who displays either intelligence about economic questions or democratic leanings of a Jeffersonian nature, or sympathy with the underdog.

Naturally, therefore, the jury is carefully weeded out until all that remain are petty bourgeois — who think that Socialism means Free Love and a reign of thievery — and class-conscious members of the ruling class.

What chance has a Socialist or labor leader before such a court?

But worse. There are, as everyone knows, persons who remain on the jury panel year after year — “professional jurors.” Their business is to *convict* — or else they are liable to lose their chance to earn \$2 a day. This applies even to the Federal juries in New York. In San Francisco the jury which convicted Tom Mooney was drawn from a list notorious for its “professional” character.

When the official organs of justice themselves disregard the law, what is there left but “might”? When the political ballot is cancelled by the money power which corrupts or nullifies the men we elect to represent and govern us, what is there left but to oppose it with some other kind of power? When, in this “land of the free,” men are sent to prison of 10 and 20 years for political offenses — punishments unparalleled in the Empire of the Russian Tsar — when conscientious objectors are tortured more fiendishly, and military offenders broken more brutally, than ever under the autocracy of the German Kaiser, what are we to do but resist? When the whole ruling class of this country, at the end of a war supposedly waged to “make the world safe for Democracy,” turns with the utmost cynicism to strengthening its own brutal power at the expense of the workers, and all the answer to our protests is a speech by Mr. Wilson that sounds like an editorial in *The New Republic*, what in God’s name are we to do except abolish it?

I do not believe, with Dr. Zucker, that “next Thanksgiving Day we will celebrate the fact that the United States recognizes the red flag of democracy.” But it is certain that if the present state of affairs continues, the red flag must soon begin

Edited by Tim Davenport. Ellipses in original.

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