

Our Obedient Congress

By LUDWIG LORE

The war session of the Sixty-fifth Congress deserves the good rating it received from the President down to the cheapest politician. For never before did an American parliament so obediently swallow so many bitter pills as did this War Congress.

It is a remarkable fact that this Congress, before war was declared on April 4th and 5th by the Senate and the House of Representatives, was by no means united. A straw vote taken by a leading New York newspaper among members of both houses of Congress on April 2nd and published on April 3rd, indicated such a strong opposition to the final alignment of the United States with the belligerent powers of Europe, that a majority vote in both branches of the Federal Parliament seemed almost impossible. And yet the incredible happened and war was declared with overwhelming majorities. In the Senate this action was taken with 86 against 6, in the House with 373 against 70 votes.

Once the deciding step had been taken, it was only logical that the means necessary to carry out the decision should be granted to the executive branch of the Government. But the enthusiasm, the unheard-of magnanimity with which it was done plainly showed how effectively the whip in the hand of the power that he must have worked behind the scenes. A few figures will give an idea of the immense amounts appropriated for war purposes during those fateful six months of the special session.

The first appropriation was the deficiency act for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1917, which failed of enactment in the previous Congress. It carried \$163,841,400.52 as compared with \$57,034,118.94 in the previous year's bill, and \$11,399,025.69 the year before. An amendment which was written into the bill in the Senate was responsible for an increase of one hundred million dollars. It reads: "For the national security and defense, and for each and every purpose connected therewith, to be expended at the discretion of the President, and to be immediately available and to remain available until December thirty-first, 1917, \$100,000,000." Furthermore the bill provides that the Presi-

dent need render no account for the expenditure of this fund of one hundred million dollars that he may "expend it at his discretion." It is more than rumored that the treasuries of such noble war propaganda agencies as the "Alliance for Labor and Democracy" are fed from this source.

Next in order was the first big bond issue authorized on April 14 and 17 by the House and Senate with 389 and 84 votes, respectively, in other words, by a unanimous vote of all members present. This act authorized the Secretary of the Treasury, with the approval of the President, to borrow on the credit of the United States an amount not to exceed \$5,000,000,000 for the purpose of meeting expenditures authorized for the national security and defense and other public purposes. Besides this the act authorized the Secretary of the Treasury for the more effectual prosecution of the war to purchase, at par, from foreign Governments then engaged in war with the enemies of the United States, their obligations hereafter issued and appropriated for this purpose \$3,000,000,000 or so much of this amount as might be necessary. In addition the Secretary was authorized to borrow from time to time such sums as in his judgment might be necessary and to issue certificates of indebtedness at no less than par, bearing interest not to exceed 3½ per cent. The sum of such certificates was at no time to exceed \$2,000,000,000.

The regular Army appropriation act for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1918, passed in the House and Senate on April 4 and 3 with a viva voce vote—i. e., without opposition—carried \$273,046,322.50 as compared with \$267,596,530.10 for the fiscal year ending in June 1917, and \$101,959,195.85 for the year ending in the previous June, showing that the "regular" expenditures for the military establishment had increased almost threefold during the last two years. This same bill authorized the President to take into the immediate possession of the United States any vessel within its jurisdiction owned in whole or in part by a corporation, citizen, or subject of any nation with which the United States might be at war, or under register of such a nation.

The first big war appropriation was passed in the House on May 2 with 362 yeas and 1 nay—that of Mr. Meyer London—and in the Senate on May 19 by a viva voce vote. This act carried an

appropriation of \$3,281,094,541.60 for Army and Navy expenditures arising out of the war. But this insignificant sum of more than three and a quarter billion dollars was a comparatively small item, for the same law granted to the President immense powers which included a money outlay of more than the original sum appropriated therein. The President was authorized to place orders with any person for such ships or material as the necessities of the Government—to be determined by the President—might require during the period of the war; to modify, suspend, cancel or requisition any existing or future contract for the building or purchase of ships or material; to requisition and take over for use any plant in which ships or materials are built—in short gave to the President and to him alone full authority to buy, requisition, order, take over or cancel whatever is necessary for the conduct of the war. The floor leader of the Republicans in the House stated, while this bill was under consideration, that in his opinion “no man on earth has or ever has had such absolute powers as were bestowed by the Congress of the United States upon our present President.”

On July 14 there passed in the House—with a viva voce vote, Mr. Meyer London not objecting—the Aviation Act which set aside \$640,000,000 in a lump sum for the pay and equipment of additional officers and enlisted men, in such numbers as the President might deem necessary, and for the purchase and production of all types of aircraft, guns, armament, aviation fields, barracks, etc. And here the same gentleman who on the previous occasion had complained of the unlimited powers that Congress had granted to the President explained on the floor: “If I had my way about it, I would pass this bill without saying a word.” And though he was not able to shut off debate entirely, nobody seemed to care to discuss the merits or demerits of this bill, for after a few unimportant remarks from some of the would-be authorities on aerial warfare in the House, the act was passed without opposition.

The second bond issue came before Congress in September and was passed promptly and without the slightest opposition on September 6 and 13 in both Houses by a viva voce vote. The Socialist seems again to have been absent. It authorized the Sec-

retary of the Treasury, with the approval of the President, to borrow on the credit of the United States \$7,538,945,640 and to issue therefor bonds in addition to the \$2,000,000,000 bonds already issued. Of this sum total \$4,000,000,000 was set aside for establishing credits with allied governments. Furthermore, in addition to these bonds and certificates of indebtedness the act authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to borrow from time to time such sums as in his judgment might be necessary to meet authorized public expenditures, and to issue therefor war-savings certificates. The entire sum of war-savings certificates outstanding must at no time exceed \$2,000,000,000.

The second war appropriation followed immediately. It was reported to the House on September 6th and passed on the 18th by a viva voce vote—once more without the vote of the Socialist member of the House being recorded against it. It carried \$5,356,666,016.93 and \$635,000,000 for the emergency shipping fund, thereby raising the limit of expenditures under the shipping act to \$1,734,000,000. The last appropriation passed in this session of the Congress amounted to \$176,250,000. It is known as the military and naval insurance act and established a Division of Military Insurance to provide a) governmental family allowances and compulsory allotment of pay for the support of dependents, b) compensation for death, or disability due to injury or disease resulting from service, c) ability to get additional insurance at low cost. It, too, passed without a dissenting vote.

The total appropriations and contract authorizations for the fiscal year 1918—exclusive of \$7,000,000,000 for loans to the Allies aggregate to \$14,390,730,940.46; with the seven billion dollars loaned to the Allies to \$21,390,730,940.46.

But this is only a small beginning, and shows but one phase of the activity of the War Congress of 1917. Far more important, perhaps, is the work of these “representatives of the people” that deals with the rights and liberties of the population. It may be rather bromidic to refer to the worn-out phrase of the “War for Democracy.” But since it is the official version we cannot very well overlook it. Certainly, if it is or is to be a war “to make democracy safe in the world,” the United States Congress has nothing to do with that particular end of the job. It did

everything in its power and a little more to make autocracy and reaction the dominant factor in this country. It talked about the liberties that must be preserved and then acted in exactly the opposite direction. It is a remarkable fact, indeed, that the Senate was doing far more to protect the rights and the constitutional guarantees of the people than the so-called "popular branch" of our government. Men like La Follette, Gronna, Hollis and a few others showed real courage and more independence from the war-mongers and the White House than even the better class of representatives in the House. It was in the American Upper House that the Censorship Bill was defeated, that the Espionage Act was fought so hard that it looked for a few weeks like a sure loser, that the pernicious paragraph in the food control bill was fiercely attacked and that a serious attempt was made to get a strong hold of the war-profits. The House, at best, acquiesced after the Senate had shown fight, but it never originated anything worth while. It proved much inferior to its "plutocratic branch," always playing the second fiddle and ever so often the more vehemently capitalistic one. In this connection again attention must be called to the totally unsatisfactory record of the Socialist Congressman, Mr. Meyer London. His whole activity during this momentous session was of such inferior character, showed such an astounding indifference to every fundamental question that arose and to practically every debate of importance that occurred that several of the more progressive Democrats and Republicans proved themselves of much higher value to the people at large. His voting record is equally bad and not only justifies but demands his expulsion from the Socialist Party, since he either directly voted in favor of or in many cases failed to record his vote against war measures and appropriations for military and naval purposes.

If Mr. London is right, let us do away with the provisions of the Party Constitution which automatically expel any elected official who votes for military or war appropriations. But if he is wrong—and we are firmly convinced that he is—justice should be done, as provided for in our party laws. Nor need we hesitate for fear of making Mr. London homeless. He will be received,

with open arms, by the many-sided, fifty-seven-varieties-in-one National Party to which, in spirit, he already belongs.

The biggest fight in Congress was waged around the conscription act, which was passed in the House on April 28 with 397 yeas and 24 nays and in the Senate on May 1, with 81 yeas and 8 nays. It authorized the raising of all organizations of the Regular Army to the maximum enlisted strength authorized by law; the drafting into Federal service of the National Guard and the National Guard Reserves; and the drafting of a force of 500,000 men upon the principle of universal liability to service. The bill also authorized the President at his discretion, to raise and begin the training of an additional force of 500,000 men; and to raise such ammunition and depot batteries and battalions as he might deem necessary, and such recruiting training units as might be necessary to maintain the drafted forces at maximum strength. From this it can be seen that the President is authorized not only to conscript 500,000 plus 500,000 men but as many men "as be necessary to maintain the drafted forces at maximum strength." That may mean two, three, five or seven million men . . .

We are all familiar with the provisions of this act. But it contains one feature that deserves more than the negligible attention generally accorded to it. It is the clause that exempts members of well-recognized religious organizations whose existing principles forbid its members to participate in war in any form, from service in the naval and military forces, except for such service as the President may declare non-combatant. We find here the same distinction in favor of religious bodies and faiths that has characterized legislation of our times. Only recently, the amendments to the Immigration Laws of the United States recognized the right of asylum for people persecuted for religious reasons but failed even to mention political refugees. Here again we see the same attitude. The man who is a conscientious objector from other than religious scruples is disregarded—nay, more—is branded as an outlaw, as a traitor and a coward. Mr. Baker, Secretary of War, relieved the situation somewhat, it is true, by an order, issued last August, which promised a more lenient treatment of conscientious objectors; how this promise will be carried out remains to be seen.

The Food Bill is, essentially, a measure that would deserve the undivided support of Congress as an act giving the President and the Food Administration the greatest possible latitude in the vigorous prosecution of that group of American profiteers who are coining gigantic profits from the hunger of the masses. But even in this almost revolutionary measure we find a clause, which may, by interpretation, be construed into a prohibition of all strikes and labor uprisings in those fields of industry that are employed in the production of the necessities of life. The strong protest of the few progressive people in Congress did not prevail—the dangerous clauses were insisted upon and labor is threatened with fines and penalties as soon as it asserts itself against exploitation.

The most nefarious piece of war legislation is the so-called Espionage Law. For this act does not—as would be proper and justifiable—provide for severe penalties for spies and espionage, it does not simply place the law concerning enemies of the country on a war basis. It attempts—and results have already shown how effectively—to stifle all anti-war propaganda and peace agitation. It aims its hardest blows against the “enemies within,” the anti-war Americans, the Socialists and Internationalists. Comrade Fred Krafft of New Jersey, a party member who as a delegate to the St. Louis convention signed the compromise minority resolution, and later wrote and spoke for it in the party press and at party meetings, was found guilty under a provision of this law and sentenced to five years imprisonment and a heavy fine, because he was alleged to have said something in a public speech that was regarded as “treasonable.” Twenty-seven Socialists of South Dakota were found guilty under the same act and sentenced to imprisonment from one to five years for the crime of signing a petition to Congress for the recall of the conscription act. And more than two score of similar cases have been reported during the last three months.

Another especially pernicious paragraph of the same law is title xii relating to use of the mail. It declares unmailable every publication of any kind (including a letter) which violates any of the provisions of this act, and every publication of any kind containing any matter advocating or urging treason, insurrection,

or forcible resistance to any law of the United States. Whoever attempts to use the mails of the United States for the transmission of any matter declared by this title to be non-mailable shall be punishable by not more than five years in prison, a fine of not more than \$5,000, or both. The Postmaster-General, who is the Czar over everything that appears in print, upon whose decision depends the mailability of every newspaper or periodical in the country, whose opinion as to what does and does not constitute treason is final, has become not only the High Inquisitor, but Judge as well over the freedom and the liberties of the American people. The more the war progresses, the more will the fiendish claws of this piece of legislation become apparent.

The discussion that took place in the Senate when the Revenue Act came up for a vote was enlightening. The administration bill had been so careful not to hurt the big interests by too heavy taxation, that even Congress rebelled. Senator La Follette brought in a wonderfully illuminating minority report showing the gigantic war profits of the big monopolies and war profiteers, a report that caused a sensation throughout the country and forced an unwilling Senate and an even more unwilling House to adopt an average increase of the tax rate of about 12 per cent. It may be mentioned in passing, that the war industries of Great Britain pay a tax that is equal to 80 per cent. of their war profits.

The vials of wrath that were poured out upon the head of La Follette in the capitalist press—and in the resolutions adopted by such unquestionably patriotic bodies as the Chambers of Commerce of New York, Pittsburgh, Chicago and Boston, to name only a few of the real American and public spirited organizations,—was aroused much more by this minority report with its convincing figures of patriotic exploitation than by the St. Paul speech, which but furnished the ostensible motive for their attacks.

The “Trading with the Enemy Act” would not call for comment had not the astute politicians performed the admirable feat of saddling upon this seemingly technical war

measure a most oppressive provision for the arbitrary curtailment and chicanery of the public press and the freedom of the press. It not only forces upon publications printed in a foreign language disagreeable duties that, in most cases, patently fail to strike the real offender—if by this term is understood the press with real pro-Kaiser leanings and love of the very autocracy that this country has set out to destroy—but provides that it shall be unlawful to transport, carry, or otherwise publish or distribute any matter which is made unmailable by the espionage act. That means, of course, the absolute suppression of all printed and written matter that is objectionable to the Government as represented by Mr. Burleson, Postmaster-General, in whatever language it may be printed.

This law provides penalties as exorbitant, so out of all proportion to the "crime," that the rulers of Prussia might well feel inclined to adopt the American brand of democracy, as superior to their own bungling autocracy. And no one who knows German conditions will deny that our war legislation is, in certain respects, more severe and more reactionary than are the laws of Germany in their present application. This is proven by the whole spirit that dominates our public life at the present time, and is evidenced by the expulsion proceedings against Senator La Follette in the U. S. Senate. Karl Liebknecht used much stronger and more direct language than did Senator La Follette. Yet it did not occur to his worst opponents to demand his expulsion from the Reichstag.

We are far from being apologists for German militarism and autocracy. It, therefore, makes the hurt only more poignant to state the simple truth—that the United States, to-day, stands under the iron heel of a capitalism as reactionary, under the domination of a bureaucracy as arrogant, as was ever suffered or tolerated by Germany or any other European nation.