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Tribunals and Political Objectors

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With the calling up of the 1906 class the number of men signing the Conscientious Objectors' Register exceeded 50,000. The majority of these are pacifists of the Bible-in-one-hand and minister's-letter-in-the-other type, whose objection to war is in no wise connected with any *political* opposition to the war, or to a clear understanding of its causes. It is in most cases a strong dislike of taking another man's life, and, incidentally, a great fear to expose one's own life to danger. On the other hand, with the calling up of the older age groups, the small percentage of C.O.'s is not a true indication of the feeling amongst these men with regard to the war, for a great number of them are in reserved occupations, and do not feel the need to register as C.O.'s. This action would result in the loss of their jobs, and in the case of Socialists and Anarchists a very slender chance of exemption before the Tribunals.

LONDON TRIBUNAL

The present writer attended a recent session of the Fulham Tribunal, and noted with interest the procedure, adopted by the tribunal. The first point of interest is the way the first few applicants

are more closely cross-examined than those who appear later in the morning. For instance, one applicant who appeared before them just after noon was not even questioned on his beliefs; his whole objection to war as outlined in his written statement was quite sufficient for the tribunal to form its opinion on his views! Others were asked one or two questions and then dismissed. Between noon and 1 o'clock at least 9 applicants were heard. That means that each was granted an average of nearly seven minutes, during which time they had to be called before the tribunal, their statement read out by the Chairman, witnesses called and questioned and testimonials read, besides the most essential part of the procedure (at least so one would think) – the questioning by the tribunal. During the morning session only two cases could be considered political and one of these extremely badly expressed and confused, more so when a politically unexperienced worker is made to stand up to an onslaught of questions by professional men, and is expected to offer solutions to a war which is not his responsibility, of which he ignores the inside intrigues and which, judging by results, is baffling even those who have made military strategy their profession.

The case which, however, was of most interest to us was that of our comrade Albert Meltzer, whose regular contributions to WAR COMMENTARY and our previous publications must be familiar to most of our readers. His statement naturally gave the Anarchist point of view. Owing to its length and detail we can only publish here selections from it.

> "Support for this war, and service in any capacity, whether military or non-combatant, would be for me not only an intolerable compromise to the forces of Capitalism and the State, but a radical betrayal of the international working class. In any society controlled by a ruling class or by any other minority (party or bureaucracy), there must be a conflict (which takes

To those who bring up the Tribunals as an example of the democratic traditions of this country we say that so long as it is not admitted that applicants who appear before them on political grounds have a conscientious objection to this war, though recognising the need for violence under certain circumstances, then the whole system of tribunals is a farce and a sham, and the sooner they are abolished the better. Socialists, Anarchists and other political objectors will then know exactly where they stand and what action to take.

this last remark, the Tribunal felt that it had probed quite deeply enough into the applicant's conscience and found no reason whatsoever to infer that he had any objection to war. In fact it was found that in certain circumstances he would desire a war.

Albert Meltzer's case is yet another of the political cases which have been virtually rejected without a hearing. The conclusion one can draw from the conduct of the tribunals is that whereas they are allegedly Conscientious Objectors' Tribunals they are in actual fact *Pacifist* Tribunals, in which the pacifist beliefs of the applicant are put to the test. Furthermore, it must be pure pacifism and not just anti-militarism. For according to the Tribunals if a man declares that he is in favour of violence under certain circumstances, then in their view he cannot hold any conscientious objection to war. The logical development of that argument is that anyone in favour of this war is therefore in favour of violence, therefore that person can express no horror for murder, political assassination or bloody revolution. It means that no person is able to distinguish between good and evil. And to bring the case nearer to the hearts of the Tribunals. Would they admit that a patriotic Englishman should have a conscientious objection to being conscripted in the German army, in spite of the fact that he believes in violence? The whole argument is, of course, absurd. Surely, conscience is one's ability to distinguish between right and wrong not only in relation to its personal effect but also in relation to its effect on the vast majority of people. In this way one takes each case as it presents itself and analyses it with relation to its ultimate effect. Thus whilst one can find justification in certain forms of terrorism, whose aim is the liberation of an oppressed people, one cannot so easily justify political gangsterism, nationalist feuds, etc. Similarly, Anarchists and Revolutionary Socialists, whilst willing to sacrifice their lives, in the cause of International Socialism, are unwilling to be instruments in a violent struggle between two similar systems, such as British and German imperialisms, whose aims are power and yet more power.

different forms of intensity at different times) between the rulers and the ruled. The ruled, subjects of all States, the people who, not having property or labour to exploit, have to work for a living, have one interest in common that transcends national boundaries: their freedom. The rulers, whether aristocratic landowners, financiers, industrialists, merchant-capitalists, investors or politicians, have a divergent interest in common: the maintenance of the present system.

It is quite clear to me that I have no interest in common with the Montroses, the Londonderrys, the Ellermans, the Rothschilds the Churchills any more than with the Hitlers, the Stalins, the Morgans.

The State represents a certain interest in society: it is the instrument of the ruling class. Any interests it feels itself called upon to defend must of necessity be propertied interests.

I believe the working class of Britain can only achieve its freedom by fighting its own capitalist class on the economic field, by forcing it to grant social and wage concessions, and by joining with the Colonial peoples to end Imperialism.

I am opposed to *all* Governments. Since the State is the organ of the ruling class, any classless society could only be a Stateless society. While there is government and, therefore, political oppression (in whatever form it may be modified owing to the class struggle), it is because there is economic exploitation, whether, as in this country, private capitalism, or, as in Germany or Russia, State capitalism.

I am an anarcho-syndicalist: I recognise the necessity for anarchy – that is to say, absence of government –

if mankind is to live as a social animal, and of the need for syndicalism: for a labour movement representing the workers at the point of production that will press for workers' control of the places of work.

To join the Armed Forces of the Crown and to fight, either against the German workers or against (as is quite as possible) the revolting colonial workers, would be a betrayal of every principle I hold, insofar as it was not pure hypocrisy, since, with a gun in my hand, whatever oath of allegiance I might have taken would not force me to use that gun against what the State says is my enemy, rather than against what my reason tells me is the enemy.

It would be hypocrisy for me to hide my feelings towards the class-interests which are prepared to sacrifice the world for their ambitions. I have never done so and I am not prepared to do so now.

My atheism renders me quite immune from the religious dope that draws fine distinctions between the "glory" of the trenches and the "horror" of the barricades. I believe in the class-war, whether you like it or not. I have decided myself, in the tribunal of my own reason, that I will not support imperialist war. No decision of this tribunal can make me decide to support imperialist war and oppose class war. Whatever decision this tribunal may make, my decision remains unalterable.

As a believer in anarchism, I want to see a world in which violence, the organised violence of State and warfare, is abolished, and I would only use violence in defence of the revolution. Today I have no desire other than to live in peace: I believe in the old French

slogan, "War to the palaces, peace to the cottages."[1] Even if you made me take up arms, you still could not make me alter that policy.

I do not want to see a victory for Nazi-ism, for Bolshevism, or for Imperialism. I want to see a victory for the masses all over the world, which can only be represented by their taking and holding the means of production and distribution."

(signed) Albert Meltzer.

This forceful statement, read almost in undertones by the Chairman; was a welcome tonic for those in the gallery, alter the long series of Christian pacifist cases, and the long wrangling on whether "thou shalt not kill" meant the contrary or not. But the tribunal had made up its mind even before it started questioning comrade Meltzer, when the chairman remarked that our comrade was not a Conscientious Objector, but that his real objection was to the form of government, whilst the T.U. representative suggested that he would fight for a Government which represented his Anarchic principles. Our comrade retorted that he did not believe in any form of Government. The Chairman added that, of course, he didn't believe in any form of Government. "You want people to run around wild" was his intelligent conclusion. Meltzer denied this, though another member of the tribunal saw fit to support the chairman's views, The chairman then intervened saying that this had nothing to do with the case and asked comrade Meltzer whether he had any witnesses or letters. He had none but offered a file containing articles, etc., which he had written to further prove his political convictions. These were not required, the T.U. representative pointing out that he was quite convinced that our comrade was a good Anarchist. What they wanted to know was whether he was a good C.O. With

[1] Revolutionary slogan first used by Georg Büchner in *Der Hessische Landbote* (1834)