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Becky Edelsohn: the first political hunger striker in America

Alexander Berkman

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Hunger striking was first originated in Russia by political prisoners over thirty years ago, as a protest against the mistreatment and torture in prisons. It served to arouse the world to the brutalities practiced upon the imprisoned politicals, and it has helped in a great measure, to force the Russian government to make terms with the prisoners. The case that attracted the widest attention was the hunger strike, in 1888 of the politicals in the Siberian hard-labor prison at Akatui in protest against the flogging of a woman political prisoner, Mme. Sigida. The determination of the hunger strikers was such that six men slowly starved to death when finally the government was forced to give in to the strikers' demand: the governor of the prison was removed.

Hunger striking as a protest against political injustice—as differentiated from the treatment accorded within prison—originated with the English suffragettes. Every one knows with what wonderful effect. The militant women of Europe

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have made the powerful government of Great Britain the laughing stock of the world. If they had accomplished nothing else, they have demonstrated that the determination and will power of the strong personality, inspired by an ideal, is more potent than the strongest government. They have demonstrated this power both in its immediate and ultimate effects. The government was forced to pass the Cat-and-Mouse Act and no English suffragette need stay in prison more than three of four days, no matter what the sentence of the Court. But the ultimate effect is still more significant. It has broken down among the English women the fetishism of the law, the belief in the sanctity of authority. Whatever else the suffragettes may achieve, they can contribute no greater or more lasting service to the cause of true progress.

Becky Edelsohn is the first political hunger striker in America. Only the willfully blind can fail to see the perfect justifiability and sound logic of her strike. Possessed of strong convictions and revolutionary temperament, of exceptional determination and courage, Becky refuses to compromise with the enemy. Is there any reason why any one should, except for weak considerations of personal safety and comfort? It is not given to the average to be strong and uncompromising. But Becky is not of the average. She is very exceptional—a strong personality, unusually gifted in mind and heart.

Though a very young woman, about twenty-three, Becky Edelsohn has been active in the Anarchist movement for a number of years. Not indeed as a “leader,” nor even as speakers or writer, but as one of the soldiers in the ranks, whose unobtrusive devotion and out-of-the-spotlight work for the cause is the very soul of the more conspicuous activities.

The Movement of the Unemployed of last winter found Becky within its ranks. The movement, started by a small group of obscure proletarians at the Ferrer School, at the very outset faced the problem of the lack of speakers from its own

ranks. IT was in this manner that Frank Tanenbaum joined in the work. Similarly Becky Edelsohn came to the front, inner necessity and the demand for speakers causing her to ascend the public platform—her first experience of the king—at gatherings of the unemployed at various street corners of New York City, and later at Franklin Statue (Printers' Row). Of good appearance and sympathetic voice, well versed in the subject matter of her talks, she proved effective and was soon much in demand as a speaker.

She was repeatedly arrested at Franklin Statue, on one occasion for making a collection for the unemployed. She defended her own case before the magistrate, arguing that she had as much right to make collections for the hungry as has the Salvation Army. The Judge agreed with her, and she was discharged. Her case has since successfully served as a test of the right of Socialists and other speakers to make collections at their meetings, without interference by the police authorities.

All through the Unemployment Movement Comrade Edelsohn was one of the most active spirits, devoting herself completely to the work and participating most energetically in the strenuous propaganda of those days. It was her presence of mind and exceptional bravery that practically saved the life of Joe O'Carroll, when he was so brutally set upon by half a dozen police and detectives armed with clubs and black-jacks. With her own body she protected O'Carroll till the plug-uglies stopped beating him.

At the declaration of war with Mexico, Becky Edelsohn was the first to organize an Anti-War meeting, at Franklin Statue, on April 22nd. She was arrested for "disorderly conduct," the time-worn cloak to cover suppression of unpopular ideas. She conducted her own case before Police Magistrate Simms, making a splendid defense of free speech and advocating anti-militarism. The Court sentenced her to give a bond of \$300 "to keep the peace" for three months.

“Does ‘keeping the peace’ mean that I must not speak against war?” Comrade Edelsohn asked the Magistrate.

“No,” he replied, “but when a police officer orders you to stop, you must do so.”

Becky refused to accept the bond—most logically so. Thereupon she was ordered to prison for a period not to exceed 90 days. She at one declared that she would go on a hunger strike as a protest against her unjust conviction and sentence.

The Free Speech league appealed the case, meanwhile getting Becky out on bail, which circumstance terminated the hunger strike.

Comrade Edelsohn continued her agitation against the United States becoming involved in war with the Mexican people who were fighting the great struggle for Land and Liberty. She also became active in the cause of the sympathetic General Strike in behalf of the miners of Colorado, and it was in connection with this work that she participated in the meetings at Tarrytown where she was arrested with fourteen others for attempting to speak on the Colorado situation at Fountain Square, Tarrytown, N. Y.

The Tarrytown prisoners were released on bail pending trial, and Miss Edelsohn continued her agitation in behalf of labor.

Justice Crane of the Appellate Division sustained the sentence of the lower court, and on July 20th Comrade Edlesohn was called for sentence, being given the option of a bond of \$300 to keep the peace or to go to jail for ninety days. She refused the bond and again declared a hunger strike. She was sent to the Workhouse, Blackwell’s Island, and has since been carrying on her strike, refusing both food and water. She is held in a veritable Spanish incommunicado, the authorities refusing her visitors or to receive or send any mail. She is also refused the regular privileges of other prisoners. Only one was the legal representative of the Free Speech League, Mr. Justus Sheffield, permitted to see her and that was when he had to serve the writ of habeas corpus to bring Miss Edelsohn as a

witness in the Tarrytown trial cases. No one is permitted to either visit her or to communicate with her, though a *sub rosa* route has been established.

Notwithstanding the false reports issued by the prison authorities and the misrepresentation of the capitalistic press, Becky Edelsohn is continuing her hunger strike, refusing both food and water, and determined to carry her protest to the bitter end. In a recent letter to me she writes:

“I am very low and suffering great torture. But there will be no giving in on my part. I can die but once. Many have died for the cause, and it will make good propaganda.”

Katherine Davis, Chief Jailer of New York, and Becky Edelsohn, the Anarchist rebel! These two personify the thousand-year struggle between the Old and the New. But the New always wins. The Beckies are the material that martyrs are made of. The future belongs to the Beckies.