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The Red Trade Union Congress and the Anarchist Prisoners

Emma Goldman

February 1922

Dear Comrade—We are out of the great prison—Russia—five weeks. But I still find it most difficult to adjust myself to the outside world. All prisoners who have been confined for a long time feel that way. To be sure we were in Russia only two years. But the events which crowded in upon me during that period made each day a long, painful time of hope and despair during which one could not write the things one felt, or read the things one wanted to know. One could only be a mute observer of the greatest tragedy in human history—the slow and torturous death of the Russian Revolution. I hope soon to have gotten hold of myself sufficiently to write about that catastrophe.

Since our arrival here I saw for the first time in many years some copies of *Freedom*—the file of 1921. I congratulate you on the splendid work you are doing—especially on your stand against the persecution of our comrades in Russia. I am enclosing a copy of a statement on the subject. From Riga we sent a similar article to Rocker. Perhaps you have received a copy of that too. If you have not already published that one, please publish the one enclosed.

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This statement should silence once for all the foolish denials of the Communists outside of Russia of the doings of their Holy Church. Not that I blame them, I know from personal experience how difficult it is to throw off the hold of the delusion that the Russian Revolution and the Bolsheviki are synonymous, I fought bitterly and desperately many months before I could realise the terrific falsehood foisted upon the world. And I was close enough to see the working of the Jesuit Order. So I do not blame the enthusiasts who so strenuously resent any criticism of the Bolsheviki. A lie dies hard. Think of how long the Christian lie has been dying. Let us hope it will not take so long for the lie to die which confuses the spirit of the Russian Revolution with the State machine which has crushed that spirit. No, I do not blame the sincere enthusiasts who see from afar the glamour of the Russian Government. But no words can express my contempt for those who have been in Russia, have had the opportunity to see things as they are, and who either did not want to see, or, seeing, continue silent after they go out of Russia. No wonder the hosts of delegates who swarm into Russia to be royally entertained by the Government and at the expense of the Russian people are so hated by the people. They justly see in them the blind dupes of the Government who eagerly lap up every official statement as gospel truth. Later I mean to pay my respects to these men and women who so shamefully betray both the workers in Russia and in their own countries. Now I wish to reply to the letter in Freedom of October last: "Anarchist Prisoners in Russia."

I do not know who Mr. Harry Pollitt is. He was certainly not very conspicuous at the Red Trade Union Congress. I do not know whether he was actually shown "a letter purporting to come direct from the Anarchists, glorying in the fact of aiding the counter-revolutionaries, and also claiming credit for throwing this particular bomb." I only know that if he was actually shown such a letter he was shown a dastardly forgery. The henchmen of the Bolshevik Government—the Tche-ka—have shot and still are shooting people for less than

throwing bombs. Is it likely the Tche-ka would have spared the Anarchists who were supposed to have thrown the bomb in 1919, and that it would go on keeping them in prison until Mr. Pollitt's and Mr. Tom Mann's arrival two years later? Right here it is well to point out that though the bomb was thrown after the most brutal repressions on the part of the Bolsheviki, most of our comrades in Moscow and Petrograd came out in a strong protest against such methods, Why were Messrs. Pollitt and Mann not told of that protest?

The comrades in prison at the time of the Congress could certainly not have written a letter glorying in having helped counter-revolutionaries or taking credit for that particular bomb. Granted, however, that Messrs. Pollitt, Mann, etc., were impressed by that "letter," should they not have asked to see the imprisoned men? Even in capitalist countries it is customary to investigate both sides—to listen to the accused and not only the accusers. Yet here are so-called revolutionists, Messrs. Pollitt and Mann—Mann, who has on more than one occasion stood in the dock for his opinions; Mann, the arch-enemy of politics and politicians. What do they do? They read "a letter purporting to come direct from the Anarchists" and "are absolutely satisfied as to the guilt of the Anarchists." What a monstrous outrage! But, then, Moscow has become the procurer of many so-called revolutionists. Why not Messrs. Pollitt and Mann?

One might be charitable to Mr. Pollitt's lack of fairness but not to his lack of accuracy. He states that "he, Tom Mann, and others were elected as a visiting committee to the Anarchists, with full power to grant a free pardon to all those who promised to refrain from helping the counter-revolutionaries in future. Some promised and were granted their freedom." Not one word of this is true, except that Tom Mann was one of a Committee which never visited any prison.

The episode that happened in Moscow during the Red Trade Union Congress was, I believe, reported in some of our European

papers. For the benefit of the readers of Freedom, however, I will give a short resume. Our imprisoned comrades, driven to desperation by long imprisonment and starvation, decided upon a hunger-strike. The French, Spanish, and Italian Anarcho-Syndicalists, when informed of the decision, promised to raise the question at an early session of the Congress. Some, however, suggested that the Government might be approached first. Thereupon a Committee was chosen, with Tom Mann as one of its members, to call upon the Little Father in the Kremlin. In passing he it said that Tom Mann had to be shamed into taking part in the matter. As to Mr. Pollitt, nobody knew of his existence. The Committee called on Lenin. It was told that the Anarchists would not be released as they were too dangerous, but that they would be given a chance to leave Russia. Should any one of them return, he would be shot. The next day Lenin's statement was substantiated by a letter from the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and signed by Trotsky, reiterating what Lenin had said. Naturally the threat of being shot was omitted in the official letter.

Our comrades accepted the offer of deportation. They, who had fought and bled for the Revolution, preferred to become the Ah-suerus of foreign lands to the slow mental and physical death in the Communist prisons. Thereupon two of our comrades, A. Shapiro and Alexander Berkman, were added to the Committee of foreign delegates whose duty it was to negotiate with the Government about the release and deportation of our comrades. It is interesting to note here that neither the elusive Mr. Pollitt nor Tom Mann showed further interest or concern in the fate of our imprisoned comrades. It is not judicious to show interest in Anarchists when one is the guest of a Government—especially a Communist Government.

The negotiations went on, and the idea of a public protest at the Congress was abandoned. Fancy, then, the amazement of every one concerned when at the eleventh hour of the Congress, shortly before its closure, Bukharin, in the name of the Central Committee of

the Communist Party, launched into a scurrilous attack upon the Anarchists. Naturally, the French, Spanish, and Italian delegates, supported by many others, demanded the chance to reply. That demand was granted to Sirolle only after every possible political trick on the part of the chairman, Losovsky, was used to sidetrack the demand. However, the sentiment for fairplay was so great—supported even by some of the Communist sheep representing the very great Labour movements of Palestine and other such industrial centres—that Sirolle was finally permitted to speak. I wonder why Mr. Pollitt failed to say something about this very interesting incident. It might have thrown some light on the famous letter he was supposed to have seen.

Lest your readers think that the Government hastened to fulfil its promise of a speedy settlement of the case of our comrades, I wish to say that they were released only at the end of September, that some of them were dumped upon the tender mercies of European Governments only in November, and that some of them are still waiting to be deported, while their vacant places in prison were quickly filled by other comrades. Strange, is it not? Even reactionary America does not dare to deport her native sons. The Russian Government dares to do such an outrageous thing because the enemies of the "Russian Revolution and the friends of the Bolsheviks" have confused the whole world about the Russian situation.

With kindest regards to all the comrades.—Fraternally, Stockholm, January 9.

Emma Goldman.