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On leaving Russia

Mollie Steimer

January 1924

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The name of Mollie Steimer, we trust will be recalled, if only very dimly, by some of the workers into whose hands this article may fall.

Mollie Steimer came as a child to the United States from Russia. When she was quite a young girl her rebellious spirit brought her into the real class struggle just at the time when the revolution in Russia broke out; and as a consequence of her activity with a number of other young workers who dared to denounce the action of the United States government in sending American soldiers to Siberia, she was brought before a United States court. Defiantly she stood up for her ideas. For this she had to spend two years in an American prison, after which she was deported to Russia.

But almost as soon as she stepped foot on her native soil, where a self-styled government of the workers ruled supreme, she found herself again in difficulty. She found the prisons of Bolshevik Russia filled just like those she had left behind. No, not with Grand Dukes and Czarist generals, but with working-men and women. They had dared to do in Russia what she had done in the United States — they had criticised the government — or were at least suspected of dissatisfaction.

For protesting against this, and for endeavouring to alleviate a little bit the suffering of these prisoners and of their families, she was thrown again into prison and finally deported from the land of her birth.

The capitalist government of the United States and the Communist government of Russia proved alike — that there is no real difference between one government and another no matter upon what pretensions it is founded. The Anarchists have all along contended that in the event of a Socialist state materialising it would prove not one iota less despotic than a capitalist one — nay, that by the nature of its position and its programme it was bound to prove even more ruthless in its suppression of all who dared to be dissatisfied or to demand real freedom from economic or political slavery. The “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” in Russia has only borne out that prediction.

How far the working masses of Russia are from that real freedom can be judged from Mollie Steimer’s letter, following:

Among other things it has been stated in the American press that I was very happy to leave Russia, and that I preferred exile in Germany to freedom in Russia. This statement attributed to me, is a deliberate lie!

It is true that the hypocrisy, intolerance, and the treachery of the Bolsheviks arouse in me a feeling of indignation and revolt, but, as an Anarchist, I have no admiration nor defence for any government of any land, and the statement that I prefer exile in Germany rather than freedom in Russia is ridiculous and false.

I made it very clear to the press correspondent with whom I spoke that in spite of all the difficulties with which I had to put up with in Russia, I was deeply grieved when I was forced to leave that country. This was not true when I left America. Although I have my entire family, good comrades and many

by placing their own agents as officials in the Unions and Shop Committees.

It happened that I was kept in the same prison where those 100 Putilov workmen were detained. When asked why they were imprisoned, I received the answer: “They charge us with counter-revolution. God knows what they meant by it.”

The above mentioned facts concern only Petrograd; but there are thousands of similar cases all over present day Russia, and yet the Bolsheviks are continually publishing stories about the glorious conditions and the free — living in the shadow of the G.P.U., cannot tell the truth to the world. Should he try it, or should he even try defending his own rights within Russia, he will find himself listed as a counter-revolutionist or a bandit, liable to arrest at any moment.

No, I am NOT happy to be out of Russia.

I would rather be there helping the workers combat the tyrannical deeds of the hypocritical Communists

Mollie Steimer

Berlin, November 1923.

munists or Communist sympathisers) refused to grant. On that day no one remained working overtime. The next day, when this refusal was repeated, the doors of the factory were locked, and the customary passes that permit the workers to leave the factory were not given out. About half the workers then returned to work — the other half stood waiting until the two hours were up and the gates opened. Each evening of that week the same thing was repeated. The doors were locked and the passes not issued. Yet it was only under the threat of being discharged that the rest of the workers submitted. As usual, a week later, those workers of the various departments who did not act like cattle, but who showed character and spirit were discharged.

In the same month — June, 1923, — the workers of the Putilov factory and shipyard went out on strike, demanding an increase in their salaries and the discontinuance of the practice of deducting high taxation from their weekly pay. Out of the small wages that the workers receive in Russia, the Government orders — without consulting the workers, of course, — a certain amount be deducted for various purposes, such as the Red Army invalids, the Red Army and the Red Aeroplane Fleet, “Cultural” work, union dues and other countless things; because of these deductions, the workers, at times, get no more than half of their wages.

After a three days’ strike of the Putilov workers, the wages were increased. But their second demand was declined, and the employees nevertheless returned to work. However, as a result of this strike, about 400 workers were discharged and 100 arrested. The most tragic part of all this is that the Union and Shop Committees, of course under the Communist management, participated in these discharges and arrests, in cooperation with the factory administration and the Government Political Department, for there is a law in Soviet Russia that no workers can be discharged without the consent of the Union and Shop Committee. But the Government solves this problem

dear friends in the U.S.A. Yet, when I was deported from there by the capitalist government, my heart was light. It was not so in the case of Russia. Never have I felt so depressed as since I have been sentenced to exile from Russia. My love for Russia and its people is too deep for me to rejoice that I am an exile, especially at a time when they are undergoing extreme suffering and most severe persecution. On the contrary, I would prefer to be there, and together with the workers and peasants, search for a way to loosen the chains of Bolshevik tyranny.

I regard the Bolshevik government as the worst foe of Russia. Its system of espionage is perhaps worse than anywhere else in the world. Espionage overshadows all thought, all creative effort and action. Despite tales to the contrary told by foreign observers who have spent a few weeks or months on Russian soil under Bolshevik guides, and despite the statements of those who receive money from the Bolsheviks for their services, there is NO freedom of opinion in Russia. No one is permitted to express an opinion unless it be in favour of the ruling class. Should a worker dare say anything at a meeting of his factory or Union which is not favourable to the Communists, he is sure to land in prison or be booked by the agents of the G.P.U.(the new name for the Tcheka) as a counter-revolutionist. Thousands of workers, students, men and women of high intellectual attainments, as well as undeveloped but intelligent peasants, are languishing today in Soviet prisons. The world is told they are counter-revolutionists and bandits. Though they are the most idealistic and revolutionary flower of Russia, they are charged with all sorts of false charges before the world, while their persecutors, the “Communists” who exploit and terrorise the people, call themselves revolutionaries and the saviours of the oppressed. Behind revolutionary phraseology they hide deeds which no capitalist government on earth would be allowed to commit without a protest arising from the whole world.

Let me give a few examples of how the proletariat is treated by the co-called revolutionists:

On March 5, 1923, the Central Government Clothing Factory in Petrograd reduced the wages of its employees 30 per cent, without giving notice or making any explanation to any of them. When the salaries were handed out, each of the workers was under the impression that it was a clerical mistake, and went for an explanation to the office, with the result that 1,200 employees went simultaneously to ask why so much of their Pay was missing. To this the factory director replied that the people ought to be satisfied with what they get and ought to thank them (the directors and the government) for supplying them with work at all. Amazed at such an answer and boiling with indignation, they decided not to resume work until they got a satisfactory explanation. Union representatives were thereupon called, but those officials refused to come until the workers went back to their machines. The factory manager told them also that if they dared to strike, all of them would be considered counter-revolutionists and dealt with accordingly. Immediately the workers called a meeting. While they were discussing their grievances, the union representatives entered. But instead of sympathising with the workers, one of these “defenders of labour” pounded on the table with his fist and called in a thundering voice: “I order you back to work.”

Naturally, such behaviour only aroused all present to the highest pitch of excitement. The order was bitterly resented and the meeting continued. An old workingman got up and related the conditions under which he and his family were forced to live, and asked how on earth he could keep from starvation with the miserable wages he received. The description of his own life being the very mirror of the life they all led, resulted in the most pitiful scene. Everybody suddenly burst into tears. Young and old, men and women, all were crying, and several in the audience fainted.

A few hours after this came several chiefs representing the G.P.U., the Union and together with the head director of the Petrograd Clothing factories, announced that the wages would be reduced only 18 per cent instead of 30 per cent. The workers, thereupon decided to resume work and quietude prevailed in the factory. But at the end of the next week 120 workers, who were considered to be more outspoken and determined than the others, were discharged from the factory, thrown out of the Union, and put on the blacklist; that is, on their passports were written: “Citizen ... discharged from the Central Government Clothing Factory for mutiny against the Workers and Peasants Government, with the purpose of taking over the factory.”

Thus, because these proletarians of the “Communist” state protested against a reduction in their wages, they were thrown out of the Union, and consequently they can no longer obtain work. What is still worse, they are registered by the G.P.U., as counter-revolutionists!

Now, let us take the case of Skorokhad factory. In June, 1923, the Leather Makers Union and the Communist Committee of the Skorokhad factory decided, without consulting the workers, that a club house of the district should be repaired at the expense of the Skorokhad workers (about 3,000 in number). Each of the various departments were told that it must work eight hours overtime to cover the expense of the club, and that “the other departments have already agreed to do so.” All departments without knowing about each other, indignantly refused on the following grounds; 1. That the club is not a workers’, but a Communist club, only Communist lectures are delivered there, and no other are permitted. 2. That even if they would agree in principle to working on behalf of the club, they resented the action of the Union officials and the “Communist” Committee, in having decided for them, as if they were so many cattle to do the work.

The workers demanded a meeting of the entire factory. This the Union and shop committee (which usually consists of Com-