
Jailing Radicals in Detroit

[events of Jan. 2-19, 1920]

by Frederick R. Barkley

Published in *The Nation* [New York], v. 110, whole no. 2848 (Jan. 31, 1920), pp. 136-137.

On January 2 [1920] Arthur L. Barkey, chief agent of the Department of Justice in Detroit, received an order from Attorney General Palmer instructing Mr. Barkey, according to his own statement, to raid the headquarters of a group of interdicted organizations, principally the Communist Party, "as long as they continue to meet," in a "supreme effort to break the back of radicalism" in Detroit. As a result, 800 men were imprisoned for from 3 to 6 days in a dark, windowless, narrow corridor running around the big central areaway of the city's antiquated Federal Building; they slept on the bare stone floor at night, in the heavy heat that welled sickeningly up to the low roof, just above their heads; they were shoved and jostled about by heavy-handed policemen; they were forbidden even the chance to perform a makeshift shave; they were compelled to stand in long lines for access to the solitary drinking fountain and the one toilet; they were denied all food for 20 hours, and after that were fed on what their families brought in; and they were refused all communication with relatives or with attorneys. These 800 men, so closely packed that they had to step over one another's bodies to move about at all, included in their number citizens and aliens, college graduates and laborers, skilled mechanics making \$15 a day and boys not yet out of short trousers. They were seized without warrant while attending dances and classes in physical geography and similar subjects; they were herded behind bars with no examination and no chance to inquire or explain; they were labeled in the newspapers as "Reds, Bolsheviks, Anarchists, Terrorists," and were left there for the jeering gaze of the credulous, befuddled public.

What was the crime of the 800? The crime was that these men were attending a dance or studying

physical geography and other sciences in a hall known as the House of the Masses, the headquarters of the Communist Party in Detroit. And back of that was the crime of the Communist Party — which has about 1 member for every thousand men in the country — in declaring, in stock phrases, for "proletarian revolution, the overthrow of capitalism, and the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat and the destruction of the bourgeois state."

So the Department of Justice held in this dark, foul cage a young American-born college instructor who had come down from the university during the holidays to teach this revolutionary class in physical geography so that he could better support his wife and child. Three days and three nights they held him. They held a 17-year-old boy, who had been caught at the House of the Masses to see a man about a job. They held from 4 to a dozen men who had simply been having a drink of near-beer in a café on the first floor of the building. They held at least one man who had simply stopped out of curiosity.

They held 22 men taken from another hall nearby, and labelled in the reports as the headquarters of the IWW. "We did not leave them a scrap of paper with which to do business," one paper quoted Mr. Barkey as saying. Eighteen days later, three of these 22, who, of course, were finally released, appeared before Mayor Couzens with an appeal for aid. They were officers of the Workingmen's Sick Benefit and Educational Society, they said, and with 200 sick members on their lists, they were unable to pay benefits because the Department of Justice had taken their membership and sick lists. They feared some of the members might be facing death for lack of the money due them. "We have tried to get the members together," said one of

them, "but they are so afraid of being arrested that they won't come to a meeting. And the Department of Justice won't give us the lists." The Mayor promised to do what he could. The headquarters of the IWW were actually several blocks farther down the street. The 22 members of the Workingmen's Sick Benefit and Educational Society were playing checkers when the raid was made, they told the Mayor.

The officers held one young man who was getting his dinner in the cooperative restaurant run by the Workers' Educational Society, which controls the House of the Masses. "He quit the Communist Party because he didn't believe in force," his sister said. "But the restaurant has better meals at cheap prices than any place around there, and he always ate there. They've had him 10 days now."

The raiders held altogether, it would appear from tabulations of releases made from time to time, more than 350 American citizens, or aliens who could prove conclusively, in the Department's secret examinations, that they had not even a "cursory interest in radicalism." For from 3 to 6 days they held these men and boys in this temporary prison, and then began to transfer them to precinct police stations and to the "bull pen" in the Municipal Building. All this time there was a state approaching chaos in the offices of the Department of Justice. No list of those held was available. Frantic wives and children haunted the lower halls of the Federal Building, hoping to catch a glimpse of their men through the narrow apertures of the top-floor corridor railing. "The constabulary believe that the prisoners were being incited by a number of well-dressed women, who came up to the 4th floor and waved handkerchiefs and scarfs to them," said one newspaper in reporting the efforts of these relatives to learn if their men-folk were among the prisoners. The women often were well-dressed, for their husbands were skilled workmen, earning substantial wages in many cases.

As the men were transferred to the precinct stations, policemen sent these frightened women out to these stations, when calls for the men wanted, which were permitted after the first few days, failed to bring a response. For days they besieged the precinct stations, bullied by the police and refused permission to see their men or learn where they were. In many cases, it was more than a desire to converse that led these women

on their fruitless search. They needed food at home. Their children were suffering from lack of bread. Their men had cash in many instances; most of them had bank deposits also; but under the order holding them incommunicado it was impossible for their wives to get either the cash or orders on the bank for the money they needed to stave off hunger. Dozens of the women were sent to the public welfare commission by their attorneys. One attorney tells of a woman fainting in his office. On being revived, she said she had eaten nothing for 3 days. Taken to a nearby restaurant, she fainted again at the smell of food.

Among these families were the wives and children of American citizens, whom officials of the Department of Justice admitted they had no right to arrest. "Do you know how many citizens you've got up there?" Mr. Barkey was asked by a reporter on the third day after the first raid. "No, no," he replied nervously, "but don't say anything about citizens being held. We haven't any right to arrest citizens, you know, so don't say anything about that." When one newspaper reported Mr. Barkey to this effect, and told the conditions under which the men were being held, another journal reported his reply as follows: "The public should bear in mind that this is not a picnic, and the Department of Justice is not providing settees for criminals [350 of whom were later released for lack of evidence]. They have to sleep on the floor. That's right. But a stone bed in the post office probably isn't any harder than a board bed in the jail. The majority of them are getting better than their 5-sleep-in-a-bed homes, and they have more food than they can eat. Relatives and friends have brought in whole boiled hams, boxes of oranges, and other delicacies."

At the Municipal Building, where some of the men were taken after 6 days in the corridor prison, the same abominable conditions were reestablished. From 130 to 140 men were herded into the police "bull pen," a room built to hold petty offenders for not more than 3 or 4 hours, a one-window cellar room, 24 by 30 feet in size, with no place to rest but wooden benches and a stone floor. For 7 days these men were held here, sleeping on the floor, fed largely by the contributions from relatives handed through the single grated door. Many of them were ill; one was suffering from an infected hand which had had no treatment. Employees in the café of the building threatened to quit

if the men were not removed. "These conditions are intolerable in a civilized society," Mayor Couzens told the City Council, after asking it to demand that the Federal authorities remove the men to a proper place of confinement. To back up his request, he submitted a report from the superintendent of municipal buildings and the health commissioner, reporting the situation as "intolerable and a menace to the health of the city." Nothing was said of the health of the imprisoned men. "The conditions are no worse than they were in the Federal Building," the health commissioner said.

When the prisoners held in the "bull pen" were taken there from the Federal Building, cameramen were on hand to film them. Six days' imprisonment without opportunity to shave, 6 nights of sleeping in their clothing on a stone floor, had prepared them well for the enforced role of "Bolshevik terrorists" with which the public is regaled. And these films, like the photographs taken at the House of the Masses, probably are doing their vicious work of rousing hate and intolerance all over the country today. At the House of the Masses, some Revolutionary War flintlocks, used in presenting costume plays, were found in a cupboard. Stacked before a great pile of books thrown from the institution's library and surmounted with framed pictures of Lenin, Trotsky, and Marx, they made a picture all too falsely convincing of the "menace of Bolshevism."

Today, January 19 [1920], the 300 men left of the 800 seized are housed in an old army fort here. In addition, about 140 are out on bond. Warrants for holding these 440 arrived from Washington on January 12, 10 days after the raids. These warrants, the chief immigration inspector explained, "would block further efforts of attorneys to gain release for their clients through habeas corpus proceedings"! Fore there are a few attorneys courageous enough to take the cases of these persecuted people. One of them is Walter A. Nelson, a student of constitutional law and sociology, and head of a corporation engaged in supplying milk to 180 Detroit stores at 2 cents under the prevailing rate. "I would not defend one of these aliens if the Government would open its gates and permit them to

leave the country," Mr. Nelson said. "But the Government refuses them passports to leave and then arrests them for staying here. Scores of these people came to me months ago to help them get passports. I couldn't get them. Now the Government proposes to ship them to some unknown port, with what not possibilities of death awaiting them, and to leave their families behind to starve. It is an outraging of everything America ever has stood for."

This is the situation in Detroit today. Nearly 400 men, citizens and aliens, are free again after being confined for one to two weeks under conditions of horror, confined because their peaceful assemblage, guaranteed by the Constitution, led the Department of Justice to suspect that their beliefs, also protected under the Constitution, were inimical to the peace and safety of 110,000,000 people. Nearly 400 men are free after a taste of "Americanization" that bodes ill for any future Americanizers who do not come backed by the clubs of the police and the constabulary.

Nearly 400 men, and hundreds more women and children, have had the seeds of hatred sown in their breasts. And probably 400 others, no more guilty of a crime than these, are waiting exile to Europe to spread those same seeds of hatred there. Thousands more of the city's great foreign-born population have had terror planted in their bosoms — terror like that which makes it impossible for the leaders of a sick benefit society to get its members together. And terror and hate are close akin. As for those Detroiters who may sometime have read the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, or remembered the proud boast that this was the land of freedom for exiles from autocratic Europe, a revulsion silent, but none the less deep-seated and stern, has come. The Mayor, who speaks as strongly as he can, represents the indignation and resolution of others who speak not at all now, but who may speak at the ballot box at some not distant day. The people, sound at heart and steadfast for the right when they know the truth, will someday come to demand an accounting for this slaughter of Americanism to make a Presidential candidate's holiday.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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