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# The Story of the First Anti-War Prisoner: Arrested for Fighting the War!

by J.O. Bentall

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Two men parked their automobile near the road and started to walk across a large wheat field to the big tractor pulling a line of self-binders cutting the grain just ripe on a Minnesota farm in the summer of 1917.<sup>1</sup> I was driving the engine and was stopping for an adjustment when the two men reached us. One of them was a United States deputy marshal and the other was the deputy sheriff from our own county seat.

A few words of introduction and then the marshal spoke up quietly and said, "I have a warrant for your arrest Mr. Bentall."

"That's very interesting," I replied. "Now what have I done?"

He handed me a document that charged me with having interfered with the military and naval forces of the United States by "wrongfully and unlawfully attempting to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, and refusal of duty among the armed soldiers of the country."

For the moment I could not remember having done any such thing, for I had been working faithfully on the farm about 16 hours a day and had not been away from the cows and machinery for over 3 weeks.

It developed, however, that I had spoken at a mass meeting in Hutchinson, Minnesota, nearly a month before and had there committed the "crime" for which I was now arrested.

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From 1904 on I had been in the Socialist Party and was for some 6 years State Secretary in Illinois, with headquarters at Chicago, and had been fighting the right wing culminating in the battle at the

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<sup>1</sup> J.O. Bentall (1870-1933) was arrested at his farm near Litchfield, MN on August 9, 1917.

1912 convention in Indianapolis, where Ruthenberg, Haywood, and myself fought to the very teeth the Hillquit-Berger-Germer crowd. When I left Chicago in 1914 I went to the farming sections of Minnesota. It was not long till farmers' clubs and cooperatives and other organizations began to call upon me for lectures. For some three years I spoke widely in the state, especially in the schoolhouses and in the smaller towns in Meeker County. I had foreseen since the beginning of the war in Europe that the profiteers would soon have this country in the mixup. I made this warning prominent at all meetings.

When the draft act was passed and it became clear that the farmers were going to lose their boys there was a sharp reaction. From all over the county farmers with their families would drive up to where I lived and ask what could be done to save the boys. The farmyard would be full of anxious workers and I spoke to the crowds on many occasions.

Then in July the big meeting was arranged for me in Mutchinson. It turned out to be the surprise of the state. Over 10,000 people had come from all around and the park was packed. I spoke for two hours on the cause of the war. I also showed that under capitalism war could never be eliminated.

It was this speech that led to my arrest. It was the first one under the Espionage Act.

I was taken from the field and rushed 80 miles to Minneapolis and slammed into jail. Bail was fixed at the modest sum of \$10,000. It took weeks to get it. Not a Socialist was to be found in the county from which I came. But some farmers got together and raised the bail, so after the grain was overripe and down I was let out to await trial.

We fought the case from court to court. The first time it was reversed by the Court of Appeals. In the meantime a frame-up charging "draft obstruction" had been formed against me. I served one year in a Minnesota dungeon on that. When I got out the Espionage Charge was still hanging fire. I was tried again. Convicted. We appealed. Failed. So in 1922 — four and a half years after the speech and over three years after the war was over — I had to leave my job as editor of *Truth* at Duluth and put in two more years at Leavenworth.

Hundreds of other workers were given similar treatment. Over 3,000 conscientious objectors were held for a long period at the Leavenworth military prison. It was nightmare of persecution that no one in it can forget.



The soldiers were promised everything in the world if they submitted to the draft. They were going to get their jobs back. they were going to get their sweethearts back. They were going to be the favored sons of the country.

Hell, yes!

But what did they get?

Many of them got a white cross over their hold in the ground where they fell.

Many of them came back with shell shock and broken limbs and crippled bodies.

Many of them are sitting in the subways selling pencils or standing on the street peddling apples.

All of them lost everything and gained nothing.

In these days of starvation when they need the few cents called a bonus, the great government that took them and set them in the jaws of death and promised them everything if they would fight and be patriotic and save their country, is squealing like a stuck pig when the boys ask for their crumbs. This great government has decided to give the boys half of their bonus as a loan — hell! — as a *loan!*

And this loan is to be only up to half of the bonus, and the boys are to pay 5% interest on their own bonus.

And while the master class is thus cheating the very boys that gave their all, this same class is calling on the workers to get ready to serve in a new war. The greedy profiteers are now getting ready to make a new call upon the youth of the land to dive into another bloodbath and to give their lives for the enrichment of the parasites that have never done anything but lied and robbed and murdered the innocent and the honest and the unsuspecting working class.

The Communist movement is in the field to put a stop to the outrages heaped upon us by the warlords. We are growing and will grow till we will be able to bring light to to the masses and to unite the working class and make possible the destruction of the entire war system of capitalism and construct a social order of peace in which the workers and farmers shall be the owners and the rulers.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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