
Letter to William F. Kruse in Chicago from Joseph M. Coldwell in Atlanta Federal Penitentiary [released June 25, 1921]

Published in the *New York Call*, v. 14, no. 177 (June 26, 1921), section 1, pg. 6.

[To Bill Kruse]

I have received permission to write you a special letter. This is in addition to the weekly letter I am allowed as a first grade prisoner. So, you see, that even under the most favorable conditions it is pretty hard to keep up with one's correspondence. So I am going to ask you to share this letter with Bertha White, to whom I am under many obligations for her kindness. I received quite a few letters and cards from different parts of the country. Of course, it is utterly impossible for me to answer each one personally. Will you, or Comrade White (Bertha), kindly make a general acknowledgment for me, thanking the comrades who wrote, and explain why I cannot answer each letter? If you or Bertha will do this I will say a prayer for you. Let me know who is entitled to the prayer.

I passed my birthday very pleasantly, under the circumstances. I started several times to sing "My Country, 'tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty," but remembered where I was, and sang "The Red Flag" instead, with emphasis on the last verse. So, you see, my treatment here is not as harsh as some people think it is, or as cruel as the un-American Legion would like it to be.

Personally, I am feeling fine, in fairly good physical condition, except that my eyes are going back on me, and, with old age within hailing distance, my lameness is beginning to tell on me. Mentally I am just as young as ever, and my hopes and aspirations are just as vivid as ever. I have 8 months and 10 days more to serve, then I will

regain my "freedom." I have the consolation that I have not become "repentant," that I have not asked for anything from the powers that be. I have taken everything they gave me with a grin, even when I could not smile.

Of course, imprisonment is not a pleasant thing, even under favorable conditions. To be under constant discipline and surveillance becomes irksome; but I think the greatest hardship is that we are not permitted to have radical papers or magazines. We try to keep in touch with the developments in the movement through our letters and the few visitors we receive. Victor Berger was down here recently, and he is the same old Victor. I am afraid he will not be satisfied until he has a movement of his own. I doubt if he would share it with Morris Hillquit.

We are anxiously awaiting the results of the [June 1921 Socialist Party] convention, which will either hasten or retard the growth of the Socialist movement in this country. Personally, I hope you and Engdahl will succeed in having the convention adopt a sane policy. The latest Van Lear fiasco should be a good argument against the old pure and simple policy. We have had too many politicians of that type in the party. Politicians who looked upon the securing of public office as the goal, the Lunn type, seems to predominate the party.

With a new realignment, with new methods of organization, and education, I believe it is possible to build an aggressive, up-to-date Socialist Party in America. There are quite a few of us who do not agree with the idea that the revolution is just around the corner. While we fully appreciate what has been done in Russia we realize that we are living in America and that we have conditions here to contend with that are peculiarly America. I cannot say that I am in complete accord with the 21 conditions [of the Comintern]. They should not apply to this country. But this I am sure of, we must have a party made up of workers who call this country their home. I know of no historical precedent which tells us of a labor movement, political or industrial, in any country that was dominated by workers of other countries. While we all would like to see real internationalism, we should not blind ourselves to the fact that it does not exist. The Russians are intensely nationalistic, the Swedes did not go to the defense of the Finns, and the Germans were satisfied with an imperial

republic. Why not sick to our knitting and realize that our work is here, in America.

Just now I am without a home, politically, as I cannot quite go the CP and the SP, as constituted at present, does not come up to my ideas of what a working class party should be. I believe in political action, based on working class needs, and backed up by a class-conscious membership. By the way, do not permit any delegate to say that he represents our sentiments [i.e. that of the Atlanta prisoners], as no such authority has been given. Kindly send all typewritten copies of reports of the convention that will keep us informed of developments. Send them by first class mail, do not send printed matter, as such must come direct from publishers.

Give my warmest regards to the Yipsels and the kiddies of the SSS at your picnic next Sunday.¹ I wish I were there, if only to hear them sing. If you see Dan White ask him to tell you about the sideshow he and I ran at a Socialist bazaar in Brockton many years ago.

Say Bill, that redheaded kid of yours must be a wonder. I'll bet he can say "economic determinism" — just try him on it. Get his mother to teach him to recite "My Papa is a Socialist." It is one of the song books and makes a dandy recitation for a kiddie.

Kindest regards to all the comrades. Take your courage with you to the convention and go the limit. Don't mind us in prison. Think of the workers that need freedom from industrial bondage.

Yours for Socialism in our time, if we hustle,

Joseph M. Coldwell,
Convict 10057.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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¹ The "Yipsels" were members of the YPSL — the Young People's Socialist League, youth section of the Socialist Party. The "SSS" were young participants in the Socialist Sunday Schools, a children's propaganda movement of the party.