

---

# Russia — The World's Greatest Labor Case: A Speech in San Francisco.

by Robert Minor

Published in the *New York Call Magazine*, September 14, 1919, pp. 1, 4-5.

*Robert Minor, cartoonist, formerly associated with the New York Call, has recently returned to the United States from Soviet Russia. We publish below the second speech that Minor has delivered since he returned. Minor tells some things about Russia which the world may not have heard before. He argues for the withdrawal of American troops from Russia and a complete Recognition of the Soviet government. Minor is in San Francisco.*

—Sunday Editor [David Karsner].

• • • • •

The last time that I stood on this platform was 3 years ago, when a little group of labor unionists and a few cranky journalists like myself undertook to tell San Francisco citizens, and especially the organized labor portion of San Francisco, that there was a labor case about to start. There were others who told you it was not a labor case.†

That was 3 years ago, and many things have happened since. I called to mind then that in 30 years' time things had so changed that the United States Congress was, by the economic growth of labor, compelled to pass a law at last purporting to establish the 8-hour day that they had hanged men for advocating 30 years before. The world has gone further and faster in the past 3 tumultuous years

than in those 30 years. Among other things, we have had the labor movement pure and simple, in the most reactionary land, actually take charge of the affairs of the biggest white race on earth, and it has triumphantly managed those affairs for 2 years.

I lived for the better part of one year in the city of Moscow. There I met a common Russian soldier, and I was surprised to see on his uniform a little button labeled "The San Francisco Martyrs." You know

the world has come to that point where there are no more movements, except international movements. Some people do not know, cannot understand, that the world has made that tremendous leap of the past 3 years and that the world is going to retain the progress that was gained. They cannot understand it; they do not know what happened. They cannot understand that the future is molded almost exclusively by the labor movement.

I found in Moscow a great many Americans who were trying to understand. They could not get the drift of things at all. The only question they know how to consider was "How long is this going to last?"



†- Reference is to the trial of Tom Mooney, Warren Billings, and others for the bombing of the 1916 San Francisco Preparedness Day Parade. Robert Minor was extremely active in the Mooney defense, speaking and writing a pamphlet for the International Workers' Defense League under the title *The Frame Up System: Story of So-Called Bomb Trials in San Francisco* [n.d., c. 1917].

And I wanted to tell them — “forever.” Yes, that is the answer, “forever.”

### **Frame-up Against Russia.**

At the meeting of 3 years ago in this hall we told you of a frame-up. Now we will come to tell you of another frame-up. The Mooney case was then the greatest labor case the American people had ever known. The labor case we speak of now is the most important in the history of all people of all countries. It is the case of Russia. We find, and I as a newspaper man have noticed, the details of a conspiracy to falsify the facts. In the city of Stockholm and in the city of Christiana I heard some of these plots being made. I saw in the raw the propaganda being made for the purpose of misrepresenting the Russian Revolution. I saw American and German, French and English newspaper men being ingeniously handled by propagandists with enormous sums of money for the purpose of seeing that false dispatches were sent out of Russia. Later on, after the war was over, when I went to Berlin, I was introduced to a princess. I could not understand why I was so socially elect. But I have learned why. They were smiling upon little groups of newspapermen. There is the most tremendous organized propaganda the world over to keep you from knowing what is happening in Russia. I wrote stories and sent them by cable across the water. Everything got misdirected, somehow.

I am going to tell you more about the “terror.” You will understand more thoroughly, especially you who are unfamiliar with the grim labor struggle in its full intensity in Russia, so that some of you who do not understand these things will know better why I was on the other side of the “terror” from the side considered more respectable. It comes under the head of evidence of the frame-up. We here in America, for illustration, have recently heard much about having food profiteers turned over to a firing squad, and no one is shocked.

Now picture to yourself the tense situation such as Russia is in now. Picture to yourself that men have deliberately brought bread to the price of \$1 a pound. Imagine here in America that these same profiteers had gouged you and me to the point where they took from us every day \$1 for a pound of bread and \$6 for sugar,

\$7.50 for a pound of third-class butter, and picture those food profiteers going out to make the starvation worse, blowing up the railroads, putting sand in the sugar barrels, and taking the sugar out, mixing mud into the bread, and then imagine those food profiteers blowing up several railroad trains and destroying the lives of the crews to keep them from going into the starving cities, for the double purpose of making dollars out of the scarcity of food and forcing the people to change their form of government. And then imagine these same profiteers crossing the way to the Germany lines and to Japan and asking a foreign autocracy to send ammunition, and, by the use of military force, compel you and me to accept a government which the Mikado of Japan decided would be more democratic. And when you picture that situation before a starving populace, you know why the “red terror” came on! That was the “red terror,” and, let me tell you, the Russian people are patient and the American people are not so patient. I’ll wager you that bread could not be driven to 50 cents a pound before we would have a still redder terror.

Dismiss from your minds the lies that have been told on the score of the “red terror.” Perhaps 4,500 or 5,000 people were killed under the “red terror.” For that reason Russia is to be excluded from all consideration, they say. Look on the other side of the fight. Not less than 76,000 were killed by the “white terror” and you never heard of it.

Kolchak troops put women of the working class — whenever they are young, and healthy, and good-looking — in freight trains and carry them with the army, and make war upon Bolsheviki because they “nationalize women.” Of course, the nationalization of women story is a lie.

In Russia there is just one law that makes a distinction between men and women, and that is the one which provides more food for a young mother or an expectant mother. Women received the vote in Russia before they did in America.

I must get quickly down to a narrative story. At the time that Kerensky was attempting to run a government in Russia he merely had a shell. It was just a little self-deception club that Kerensky was running. The government had no authority. Whenever anyone wanted anything he could get a government order. Whenever he asked anyone to do something for him

on the strength of this order, he was told to see the Soldiers' Committee first.

### **Kerensky — Then Lenin and Trotsky.**

Lenin had just come; Trotsky had just come, and nobody knew much about these queer things — Bolsheviki. The workingmen, nevertheless, were making demands in the factory without limit. Employers really could not run the factories, because the cost was greater than the income. Industry broke down. It is all very well getting more pay and shorter hours, but if you take more out than you put in, the industry stops.

What could be done? The employers were helpless in Russia. There were some who said all that was necessary was to shoot the workers, and others said the thing was to grind out more paper money. But the more you print, the more worthless it is. It was an endless thing. It could not continue. What was to be done? Somebody had to answer it. There was only one man who could give that answer. It was Nikolai Lenin. Now, Lenin saw it in this way: The workingmen are always demanding more than there is, and he knew the employer could not grant the demands. There was only one answer, and the answer was this: Put the responsibility of the business itself upon the workingmen. In other words, make the workingmen not only be the employees, but the employer as well, and then he will learn that you cannot pay out more than you have.

Nothing would work but this plan. Nobody was in Russia for the United States government who could understand the situation. The American ambassador was a stockbroker from St. Louis, who had come to Russia to wear knee breeches and silk stockings at the court of the Tsar. When the revolution came, David R. Francis did not know it happened. He still had his silk hat, Prince Albert coat, and his stockbroker mind.

David R. Francis continued to associate with the "better clawses" after the Russian Revolution came. He did not know how to do anything else.

When I was about to leave one of these young American representatives whispered to me: "Be careful — it is nearly sundown. Get to your hotel before dark. Look out! Don't let anyone see you with a good overcoat after dark. If you see a Red Guard, look out for your life."

These men who are in the front fight in Russia have many of them been in America. American plutocrats are very fearful lest the germs of Bolshevism be brought from Russia to America. I wonder what the Russian plutocrats feel about what the Russian immigrants brought back to Russia from America. Those who had been in America are the most radical of all. They received their political and economic education here.

### **Revolutionists Were Educated Here.**

Russia never has been a more potent generator of progressive thought than America is now. I ran across these American-Russians everywhere, and every one of them who has been here got his political education and has no illusions, knows all the potentialities of this country. Every one of them is clearheaded on one subject, and that was the two great dangers are the German and Japanese governments. No illusions about it. They did not imagine that the American plutocrats love the American labor movement. They did not imagine any more than that the American plutocrat was farther away, and was less dangerous for that reason. These fellows took the position that the Americans could afford to do something to pull through the tremendous struggle with the Germans, and they told the American representatives about it. They put it up to Francis, but there was no response. They pleaded for a continuation of the war against the German government. And Francis' only reply was: "Go away. I do not recognize you. You are not democratic."

When Senator Root came from America, his purpose was to make the Russians fight the Germans. "Make them fight for their own country." At the time he came the greatest need in the world was a revolution in Germany. The Russians were not fighting the Germans with military means at that time because they knew what the great danger to the Kaiser was, that once the German army would understand the brotherhood of man being taught by the Russians, they, too would stop fighting. Francis and Root did not understand that, because they did not know there were ideals in the world. They had caused Kerensky to make a feeble attack upon the German lines, and then the German government said to their army: "You see, the Russians have attacked you."

The German revolution might have occurred a year and a half before it did. It was the hope of the world, and two men stopped it. But guns were fired; Francis and Root make Kerensky do it. Two men killed it; two men saved the Kaiser of Germany; the two men were Francis and Root.

They saved it by making Kerensky send a few foolish men to fire a few shots and destroy the solidarity between the two armies. Before that happened, not German officer dared to say: "We are going to attack."

After the October Revolution the Russian Soviet government still wanted to fight, but Francis said that the Bolsheviki were German agents and could not be trusted. He did not take the trouble to find out what they were. He was afraid of them. But the French government sent a number of people as consular representatives, and they went and got safe conducts from the French Ambassador to visit all over the land on the railroads, and everyone carried a suitcase full of emery powder and put this in the delicate bearings of the locomotives. That was the sort of double-dealing that the Russian workers encountered from the Allies.

#### **US Ambassador Called "Old Stuffed Shirt."**

The American Ambassador ran away to Vologda, and there he gave his attention to three things: One was an effort to save the Queen of Rumania from being captured by the Germans. The second effort of the American Ambassador in these tumultuous times was to seek information as to the whereabouts and the fate of the Tsar. That sort of thing continued until he was known to every Russian by the nickname of the "old stuffed shirt."

Every agreement that the American Ambassador made with the Russian government was violated because the American Ambassador did not consider it necessary to be honest with mere workingmen. He understood that they were dishonest themselves because they had confiscated the holdings of the Russian capitalists and repudiated the debts of the Russian Tsar.

None of them could believe that the labor republic could continue to live. I used to talk with American newspaper men, and the common question was: "Will it last for another week?" I myself expected it to fall many times.

One day Trotsky walked up to an American

IWW agitator from Chicago, and he said, "Bill, do you think you can run the Nikolaevsky Railroad?" And Bill said, "I can try." That was Bill Shatov.

#### **American IWW Runs Russian Railroads.**

The Nikolaevsky Railroad is the most important railroad in Russia, and it was about to go smash because the entire clerical force had refused to help the proletariat to run it. Bill Shatov was a great failure at that part of it which involves the show of dignity. Bill was so undignified he carried my suitcase to the station. I believe I am the only man alive who has had the general manager of a railroad carry his suitcase for him.

I noticed that within a few days the Nikolaevsky trains were on time.

From the working class was found enough ability to run Russia. I noticed a young Russian-American from Cleveland. He became commander of some troops. He was 22 years old and he was a garment maker from Cleveland and he commanded troops. Nobody saluted him, but the men with him drove the proud General Kaledin's troops into the Don River.

In Moscow I met a young man who had been an IWW in Seattle and I said, "What are you doing?" and he said, "I am running a shop. I am introducing the American machine method in a tremendous factory for the manufacture of suits and clothing." And he is successful at it.

These men are doing things there every day which certain people don't want ever to happen here, and they don't want you to know about it.

Still, in spite of all these trials, the "red terror" did not show up. If we could just hold out until August and get the wheat in, then Russia could breathe at last.

The fight was going on against the Germans in the Ukraine. The Bolsheviki had made a treaty at Brest-Litovsk. They first pleaded with the United States government to help them avoid making this treaty, and America did not answer their request. The Russian Soviet Congress of March 1918 was postponed 2 days because Lenin was waiting for an answer from president Wilson as to whether he would back them up if he told the Kaiser to go to hell. There was no answer. The treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed more by Fran-



cis than by Trotsky. And the Bolsheviks never did respect the treaty. Underground warfare continued at the hands of revolutionary fighting groups.

I used to see some of these men leave, going out to the south. They carried along with them their lunch baskets — never mind what was in the lunch baskets, but they got through the German lines. And I used to see these — Bolsheviks, some of them; more of them Anarchists and Left Socialists [SRs] — go through in parties like picnic groups, going through to the Ukraine, and out of 10 that would go, about 3 would come back alive. They carried through these mysterious packages and lunch baskets, and the German munition supplies would go up in smoke shortly after they reached the Ukraine.

And yet all the time these people were called German agents.

The Ukraine was the hope of Russia, but Skoropadsky was put in power by the German Kaiser, was received at the Kaiser's court, and do you know what the very first resources were that were handled by the reactionaries in Ukraine — do you know where the very first resources came from? They came from the French treasury and the British treasury. The Allies gave military and financial help to the reactionaries of the Ukraine.

### **White Guards Were Pro-Kaiser.**

The White Guards took the money and went over to the Germans because they thought that the Germans were going to win, that they could help them better than the Allies. And then we have the example of Finland. The reactionaries were put into power by German bayonets. Yet this government was recognized by the Allies when the workingmen's government was not. After the armistice was signed, Mannerheim became pro-Ally and today he is shooting working people with the assistance of the Allies.

Admiral Kolchak has admitted in a garrulous moment that he does not intend to call a Constituent Assembly until he is certain that he will not have a Bolshevik control over the assembly.

Kolchak came into power to the tune of "God Save the Tsar," in the city of Omsk.

The Japanese government has made inroads into Siberia that constitute one of the most dangerous things

in the world today. If we have another war ahead of us in which more millions are to be murdered, look to that as one of the chief sources.

Now let me tell you something, these American democrats, if they are democrats, ought to be told that there is a vast army in Europe that is ready and willing to see that the 72,000 Japanese get out. This is the best army in Europe; the one army that has proof against disintegration has 1,500,000 in it, and it is called "The Red Army." It has as good discipline as the American army has.

We hear constantly how they are beaten next week, but never last week. And that army goes on growing and getting stronger every day, and that army is ready to see that progress does not suffer from the Japanese in Siberia, and all those so-called democrats have to do, if they really want to do away with these reactionaries, is to give recognition and support to this Soviet government.

There was one American representative in Russia who understood and saw. That was a capitalist named Raymond Robins, a capitalist of the kind that can understand a few things and see ahead, and he all along has been telling the truth about Russia. Also there were a few YMCA men who, as much to my surprise as yours might be when you hear it, have turned out to be real Christians and have come back and told the truth. They know there is no reason on earth why the Soviet government cannot be recognized.

### **Russia World's Greatest Labor Cause.**

The first thing to do is to marshal all of labor behind the movement for recognition.

Once when Mooney was arrested after pulling off a car strike, you were told the lie that he was arrested because he threw a bomb. We told you that it was a labor case because Mooney was a labor organizer, and now I tell you that this tragic Russian matter is the world's greatest labor case, because labor confiscated capital, and I defy anybody to stand up and tell me that there is really another reason for the attacks upon Russia!

Lieutenant Costello has said in the press that the American soldiers when they first came to Russia took charge of car lines during a strike there. When I came to Berlin after the armistice, I found Americans doing

police work to turn over Spartacists to those who were in with the Kaiser — turning over working people of Germany to the German government. In France I found the same reactionary situation. Street fights were going on for the life of freedom of speech and press, which are being crushed out of France.

They did not put any provision in the peace treaty that Belgium should not any longer be a kingdom. They did not help democracy in Hungary. And, after seeing all this sort of thing going on in Paris, I was looking for a breath of air, and went to the Labor Temple and there I told the truth about Russia. Immediately I was arrested and told I was to be shot.

A voice like thunder came from London that the labor movement was getting busy for me, and before you knew it the French labor movement got busy. I was released, and then I found that one thing that helped was a cablegram signed by the International Workers' Defense League, which sounded pretty loud in Paris. The cablegram was like a great, long, sinewy arm reaching out across the world to pull a man out of jail.

In England itself there has been a revolution. The fact that it has been bloodless is so much more to its credit. When I was asked what was the most powerful thing I saw in Europe, I answered, "the shop steward movement," and I believe we are going to have the same in America, perhaps by another name.

The reactionaries tell you that these things do not pertain to America; that in America we have order, and that it is all a European disorder. These reactionaries are determined to have Prussianism in America. We battled Prussianism in German and captured it and brought it home with us.

Labor is the only hope being put against them, and the most important thing to do at the present is to fight this frame-up in the greatest labor case in history.

If they want to fight the Russian Soviet Republic, let them be honest about it and declare war and tell us why. Let them come to us and tell us, "We are in a state of war," and let them try to conscript an army "to make the world safe for democracy" some more.

Now, in this greatest crisis that labor ever had, in this greatest strike of all time, for that is all the Russian Revolution is, be careful that history does not write you down as a scab.

I sometimes think that Benedict Arnold, whom you may remember as a classic traitor to the American Revolution, would not have done as he did if he could have foreseen what our children are reading about him in school. He is known today because he was a traitor to the American Revolution. Legally, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were traitors, and they would have been hanged for treason if they could have been caught. But, just the same, they were in the world for progress, and that is the stand we have recognized.

The men who stand now boldly for the Russian Revolution and proclaim it broadcast as a labor case are going to be known in the future as men true to labor. And those men like Charles Edward Russell and John Spargo, though they mean well and seem not to know any better, who are going through the world getting praise — I know, because people thought I was one of them for a while — of those people in and out of the labor movement, beware! History is writing them down forever in the blackest shame as the classic international scabs.†

†- See: Charles Edward Russell, *Unchained Russia*. (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1918). John Spargo, *Bolshevism: The Enemy of Political and Industrial Democracy*. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1919); "The Greatest Failure in All History." (New York: Harper & Bros., 1920); *Russia as an American Problem*. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1920).

***Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport.***

***Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR, 2007. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.***