

# F R E E D O M

in the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R.

By ROGER N. BALDWIN

Director, American Civil Liberties Union.

THOSE of us who champion civil liberties in the United States and who at the same time support the proletarian dictatorship of the Soviet Union are charged with inconsistency and insincerity. "How can you consistently support the right of free agitation in capitalist countries when you defend a dictatorship that tolerates no agitation against its rule?" we are asked.

On the face of the argument, our critics have a case. If we were Communists, they say, our position would be defensible. But we champion civil liberties for all without taking a class position, without confining them, as do the Communists, to the working class. We will, on occasion, even defend the rights of reactionaries to free speech and unhindered assemblage. We go outside the class struggle to oppose all forms of censorship over radio, books, movies and the theatre.

But our critics are in error in denying to us a class position. Everybody takes a class position, consciously or unconsciously. Even our critics do. They are advocates of those liberties which are freely exercised only in a capitalist society when the system is safe. And by insisting on them in any and all circumstances they become in effect the upholders of the system of political democracy which is in practice only a mask for capitalist dictatorship.

All my associates in the struggle for civil liberties take a class position, though many don't know it. There are the conservatives who figure that the interests of property are better maintained in the long run by letting the opposition blow off steam. There are the liberals who believe that capitalism can be modified, its abuses checked, and a transition effected to some vague "new social order" through peaceful agitation. There are pacifists so wedded to methods of non-violence that they would rather tolerate the colossal violence of the existing system than upset it by overt violence by the working class. All of them are in effect pro-capitalist for they have no program directed toward abolishing capitalism.

I, too, take a class position. It is anti-capitalist and pro-revolutionary. I believe in non-violent methods of struggle as most effective in the long run for building up successful working class power. Where

they cannot be followed or where they are not even permitted by the ruling class, obviously only violent tactics remain. I champion civil liberty as the best of the non-violent means of building the power on which workers' rule must be based. If I aid the reactionaries to get free speech now and then, if I go outside the class struggle to fight against censorship, it is only because those liberties help to create a more hospitable atmosphere for working class liberties. *The class struggle is the central conflict of the world; all others are incidental.*

## Proletarian Liberty in Practice

*When that power of the working class is once achieved, as it has been only in the Soviet Union, I am for maintaining it by any means whatever.* Dictatorship is the obvious means in a world of enemies, at home and abroad. I dislike it in principle as dangerous to its own objects. *But the Soviet Union has already created liberties far greater than exist elsewhere in the world.* They are liberties that most closely affect the lives of the people—power in the trade unions, in peasant organizations, in the cultural life of nationalities, freedom of women in public and private life, and a tremendous development of education for adults and children. I saw these liberties in practice. I have followed carefully their aspects since I was in the Soviet Union. While I have some reservations about party policy in relation to internal democracy, and some criticisms of the unnecessary persecution of political opponents, the fundamentals of liberty are firmly fixed in the USSR. And they are fixed on the only ground on which liberty really matters—economic. No class to exploit the workers and peasants; wide sharing of control in the economic organizations; and the wealth produced is common property.

The rigid suppression of any opposition to the program of socialism is a measure of the difficulties and in part of the sense of insecurity in a world of enemies. But so unbiased a student of the Soviet Union as Dr. Harry Ward, reported a marked let-up in the pressures from on top and a considerable extension of the "area of consent" between his two stays of almost a year each in 1924 and 1931. Harold Laski, British socialist, has just written

from the Soviet Union his opinion that *liberty of the individual to develop his powers to the full—the test of any social system—is greater there than in any country in the world.*

I saw in the Soviet Union many opponents of the regime. I visited a dozen prisons—the political sections among them. I saw considerable of the work of the OGPU. I heard a good many stories of severity, even of brutality, and many of them from the victims. While I sympathized with personal distress I just could not bring myself to get excited over the suppression of opposition when I stacked it up against what I saw of fresh, vigorous expressions of free living by workers and peasants all over the land. And further, no champion of a socialist society could fail to see that some suppression was necessary to achieve it. It could not all be done by persuasion. Doubtless there has been at times far more coercion than was necessary. The Party has itself repeatedly said so. But "workers democracy" in action is no product of coercion. *It is genuine, and it is the nearest approach to freedom that the workers have ever achieved.*

How long the proletarian dictatorship will last, only world conditions and internal success in building socialism can determine. Highly centralized authority will give way. The State and police power will eventually disappear. Civil liberties will exist again, within the confines of a socialist society; but not to oppose it, for who will want to? The extension of education, the bringing up of a generation to take active responsibility all over the Soviet Union will lessen power at the center and from on top.

If American workers, with no real liberties save to change masters or, rarely, to escape from the working class, could understand their class interests, Soviet "workers' democracy" would be their goal. And if American champions of civil liberty could all think in terms of economic freedom as the goal of their labors, they too would accept "workers' democracy" as far superior to what the capitalist world offers to any but a small minority. Yes, and they would accept—regretfully, of course—the necessity of dictatorship while the job of reorganizing society on a socialist basis is being done.