

# WAR COMMENTARY

## For Anarchism

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# THREE ANARCHISTS JAILED

## "This is a Political Trial"

### declares Defending Counsel



OUR comrades, Vernon Richards, John Hewetson and Philip Sansom, were, on the 26th April, each sentenced to nine months' imprisonment for charges under the Defence Regulation No. 39A, of attempting to seduce from their duty members of H.M. Forces. Marie Louise Richards, known to readers of War Commentary as M. L. Berneri, who was accused of the same offence, was acquitted and discharged. A report of the trial, which lasted four days, is given below. From this it will be seen that the four comrades maintained their anarchist contentions throughout the trial.

We are not here concerned with the technicalities of the case, of whether, according to the letter of a certain regulation, the three comrades who are now in prison were guilty of a crime against the law of this country. The only law which anarchists recognise is the natural law of moral justice, the law of mutual co-operation, trust and sincerity, and we know that according to that law it is a monstrous crime that three men whose actions were directed towards the establishment of freedom and harmony among mankind should be imprisoned, while those who are made rich by strife and slaughter should go free to enjoy their filthy gains and continue to suppress their fellow men.

It has been said that these men were convicted on a criminal and not on a political charge. But their 'crime' was the expression of opinions which the authorities regarded as dangerous in a political manner, i.e. as likely to threaten the political structure of capitalist society. It has been said that this is a case of the breach of a government regulation, and not a case of the freedom of speech or writing. But the very government regulation itself is aimed at the restriction of freedom of speech. If a man is told that he must not say certain things to certain people, his freedom of speech is curtailed, and if he is imprisoned for saying such things to such people, then it is a case of the suppression of freedom of speech. Furthermore, the case for the prosecution, as well as the regulation itself, is based not on any achievement of the accused, but on a sup-

posed intention on their part. But surely to tell with accuracy the intentions of any person, particularly when they have achieved no tangible result, demands an omniscience of which no human being is capable.

Whatever the legal quibbles of the case, the fact remains that our comrades acted sincerely and conscientiously according to their beliefs, and that for so acting they are now sent to prison. Their actions arose from their beliefs, and therefore they are punished for their beliefs as well as for their actions, punished for holding the doctrines of anarchism which are so much feared by the authorities of this country. We regard it as unjust that our comrades should have been imprisoned, but we regard it as a triumph that their actions should have so far excited the terror of the government of this country that it feels compelled to institute proceedings of so odious a kind.

This imprisonment of our comrades must be made the beginning of a great fight in which all who are concerned for freedom must take their part if they are not to be submerged in turn. The powers in the hands of the authorities which have caused the series of attacks on Freedom Press during the recent months are a danger not only to anarchists, but also to all radical movements and individuals whose expression of opinions is likely to cause discomfort to the ruling class. The defence regulations are framed in such a way that almost any political statement can be interpreted by an imaginative lawyer as an offence against wartime law. It is time we secured the complete liberation of speech and writing from all the slavish restrictions under which they labour to-day, and this is something which will not come to us as a gift. We can only obtain it if we take strong and vigorous action.

We demand the release of our comrades, who are imprisoned under this iniquitous law. We do not ask it as a favour, we demand it as a moral right, and we shall fight for it with every means at our disposal until we have won it. But we, and we can be sure this can be said on behalf of the three anarchists

in prison, shall regard ourselves as having gained no triumph if we merely obtain their release. We must also fight against the laws and the institutions, instruments and agents of an authoritarian governing class, which have made possible their imprisonment. Our campaign, therefore, must be threefold. We must demand and struggle for, firstly, the release of our three comrades, secondly, the elimination of all laws or regulations that interfere with the freedom of speech, thirdly, the abolition of the Special Branch, that sinister body of political police which has been growing up in this country in unhealthy secrecy for some years and which represents a powerful enemy of all freedom.

The Freedom Press Defence Committees in London, Glasgow, Birmingham, Bristol and other towns, which represent a wide variety of groups and individuals whose immediate concern is the freedom of speech and writing, are commencing a campaign of public meetings in various parts of the country, and all kinds of assistance to the committees will be welcomed. But action should not be restricted to that for which the Committees take responsibility. Every supporter of freedom should try to interest his friends and work-mates. The factory, the shop and the field, as well as the meeting place and the columns of the press, should be made the sites of discussion and action to obtain these three objectives, which we repeat. Demand—

1. The release of the three anarchists.
2. The withdrawal of all restrictions on freedom of speech or writing.
3. The abolition of the political police, under whatever name it is disguised.

## Glasgow Hits Back

The response to the call for the defence of 'Freedom of Expression' at the meeting under the auspices of the Glasgow Freedom Defence Committee in the Cosmo Cinema on the 22nd April far exceeded all expectations.

The packed hall with an attentive and sympathetic audience was an answer to the political police who have prosecuted our comrades Vernon Richards, John Hewetson and Philip Sansom. The speakers, Frank A. Ridley (I.L.P.), Roy Tearse (R.C.P.), Ernest Silverman, John Hewetson and Marie Louise Berneri, Eddie Shaw (A.F.) with Sir Hugh Robertson (Orpheus Choir) in the Chair, stressed the need for all sections of the working class movement to prevent any further inroads into what little liberty remained in this country. The two accused comrades present, Marie Louise Berneri and John Hewetson, in fighting and defiant speeches indicated that they were determined to stand firmly by what they had written irrespective of the consequences and would not detract one word or go back one inch in surrender to the dictatorial forces of the State.

The response to an appeal for financial aid brought in over £53, which added to the donations for Tickets makes the total in the region of £100.

The Committee has no intention of allowing the protest to end with this meeting. Their campaign is being widened and an appeal has been circulated calling on all organisations and individuals interested, to throw their weight into this struggle. Comrades in other Scottish districts are urged to form Defence Committees. Speakers to assist in this work are available.

All enquiries and donations should be addressed to the Secretary:

JAMES RAESIDE,  
c/o Anarchist Federation Hall,  
23, Wilson Street, Glasgow, C.1.

# A FOUR DAYS' TRIAL

## at the Old Bailey, April 23rd-26th

THE Attorney General began his opening speech for the prosecution by stating that the charges arose under Defence Regulation No. 39A, which states that "no person shall endeavour to seduce from their duty persons in His Majesty's service". He continued: "The persons in His Majesty's service whom we allege these accused endeavoured to seduce from their duty and among whom they endeavoured to cause disaffection likely to lead to breaches of their duty are persons in the Forces. . . . The first charge is that all these four persons are charged with conspiring together to commit the offence, the nature of which I have just indicated to you. . . . The first subsidiary charge is that they are all charged individually with an endeavour to cause disaffection."

The Attorney General stated that the main case for the prosecution was based on a circular letter, and three issues of War Commentary, for the 1st, 11th and 25th November, 1944. He went on to allege that the prosecution had nothing to do with the political views of the accused, and that they were being charged with breaking the criminal law.

"I shall submit to you," he said, "that the instrument which those responsible for this publication advocate is an armed revolution." He alleged that certain passages in War Commentary contained exhortations to soldiers "to organise themselves into councils in order to be ready for the armed revolution" and "when the time comes when they would ordinarily be demobilised and give up their arms to hold on to their arms." The Attorney General pointed to articles on Mutinies which occurred in the German and Russian armies at the end of the last war.

### Writing History is No Offence

"Of course," he said, "writing history is no offence, and it is really a good thing that the history of that and of other events should be written, but I shall submit to you that the descriptions of those events in this paper are not put forward as matters of history but are put forward as examples of what our soldiers should do in this country when the time comes at the end of the war and when demobilisation or partial demobilisation may take place."

He went on to discuss the circular letter, of

which copies were alleged to have been found at No. 27 Belsize Road when Vernon and Marie Louise Richards were present, at John Hewetson's house and at Philip Sansom's studio.

### The Circular Letter

"I propose to read the whole of this circular letter," he said. "There are particular passages in it to which I shall direct your attention, but sometimes if one picks out just a bit of a letter it may be that it is unfair, and therefore I think it right to read the whole of this letter so that you shall get the passages on which the prosecution rely. It is headed at the top right hand side 'Freedom Press, 27 Belsize Road, London, N.W.8. 25th October, 1944. Dear Comrades. It is a long time since our last circular letter was sent out and since then many comrades have been sent abroad. That in my submission shows pretty clearly that it is intended for members of the Forces, or in the main. On this account we naturally receive fewer letters than before, but we notice on the other hand an increased seriousness in all of them. Reflecting these present days and the future struggles ahead, your letters show a more thoughtful and anxious trend, and this we are pleased to see. We earnestly ask comrades remaining in this country to do their best to fill our depleted ranks by the introduction of new comrades. Once again we ask for more communications. A few of you, it is seen, write very regularly and often. Others, perhaps through increased duties, do not write so frequently. But always remember that anything of interest to the movement or to the general public will be seriously received. Also, comrades who find time for serious reading should try to combine this with research work for the movement and send us quotations of all items of interest. Reports of meetings, strikes, etc., that are often to be found only in local newspapers, and are consequently overlooked, would be welcome too. Many questions have been sent in by younger comrades and newcomers who want to know how they can be helpful. We ask those who write to write and keep on writing, and to learn as much about the movement as possible. We will gladly supply comrades with pamphlets and back numbers of 'War Commentary' on application. One comrade writes: 'My brother in Oxford sends me 'War Commentary' regularly which I distribute to support those views I have always held.' As can be seen from letters quoted in the Soldiers' Page of the mid-October number, all comrades visit political meetings and exchange their own literature for the literature of the party holding the meeting. We of course do not favour dogmatism or narrow-mindedness and think that all comrades ought to read our opponents' publications and compare or contrast the opinions and theories propagated there with our own. By the way, don't keep 'W.C.' in your pocket or under your mattress when you have read it. First let your room mates see it and then contrive to lose it in some convenient spot. We suggest that comrades be more active in visiting discussion groups and lectures. These are often run in the army by the C.P. nowadays or under Army Education schemes. Soldiers generally do not think much of these groups and lectures, and we sympathetically agree. Distrust and dislike of them is often

justified and many have experienced what amounts to a kind of persecution after having spoken up at meetings. On the other hand, some comrades already know the great value of well timed and apt questions which can frequently throw speakers into confusion and, though often remaining unanswered, can gain long trains of thought in motion in the minds of the audience. Besides these legal discussion groups and compulsory lecture periods, another form of discussion is always developing in barrack rooms, tents and Nissen huts, especially now that winter is approaching. These unofficial discussions amongst soldiers are frequently of vital importance and play a far greater part in 'educating' the politically and socially 'unaware' than any A.B.C. lecture could ever hope to accomplish. Our comrades should whenever possible attend and take part in these discussions. In many cases we find comrades uniting with I.L.P. men and Trotskyists to exchange thoughts and literature during and after such meetings. Many other soldiers openly express views which are unconsciously anarchist. It is the task of our comrades to help and develop these potential comrades. Experience will have taught comrades that these discussions bring a sympathy and unity of feeling to barrack rooms which authority is always trying to split by every means such as promotions or postings. For solidarity frightens authority. You should therefore do everything possible to establish closer contacts and comrades who leave a unit should immediately send us names and addresses of all sympathisers in that unit so that we can send them our publication list." Then this is an important paragraph: 'Such discussion groups mentioned above may form the basis for future Soldiers' Councils—capital 'C'. It is expected that an article will appear shortly in 'W.C.' on 'Soldiers' and Workers' Councils, and we hope to receive many criticisms and suggestions from you. One of the most important questions in our opinion is that of the action taken by comrades during and after the last war in Russia and Germany. It would seem that only a few know of their vital function and mission. In connection with discussion groups, comrades should undertake to send us reports of all meetings. This would help us to gain fuller knowledge of the views and criticisms of the soldiers who take part. Grievances reflected in discussions would when possible be made public. Comrades by the way who have problems to solve or are in difficulty over theoretical matters should send us short, to-the-point questions, which we should answer as speedily as possible. John Olday's cartoons, according to letters received from comrades, are being used instead of 'pin-up girls' on barrack room and hut walls and have proved most effective media for arousing discussions, although often provoking interference from ignorant N.C.O.'s and officers, the freedom of speech and thought not being part of the army structure. In three units at least the showing of these cartoons has developed into a regular wall newspaper which comrades also fill with cuttings from 'W.C.' 'Through the Press' feature and with their own cuttings. We have received many poems which we shall keep and make use of sooner or later. Especially does the movement need marching songs and 'hymns'. When writing these and other poems comrades should be

careful of rhythm and metre, unless the modernist 'free verse' (unsuitable for singing of course) is adopted. In any case, carry on writing, poets; there may be an Erich Muehsam or a Lorca in your midst!"

### Not Concerned With Accuracy

The Attorney General then turned to War Commentary for the 1st November, and the article headed "All Power to the Soviets." "I submit" he said, "it is quite plain that what has happened in the past is being put before the readers of this paper as a policy which is to be followed and the lessons of which are to be learned so as to see that it does not fail this time."

He next referred to War Commentary for the 11th November, and the article headed 'People in Arms.' "There are references to events in France and Belgium," he said. "We are not concerned with their accuracy or inaccuracy, but what we are concerned with is, as it were, the moral which is to be drawn from them at the end."

(Report of the Trial continues on page 4)

FREEDOM PRESS DEFENCE COMMITTEE  
— FREE THE PRESS CAMPAIGN —  
HOLBORN HALL, LONDON, W.C.1.  
SUNDAY, MAY 13th, 6.45 p.m.

### Speakers include:

|                      |                       |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| MARIE LOUISE BERNERI | FREDRICK LOHR         |
| HERBERT READ         | EDDIE SHAW            |
| ERNEST SILVERMAN     | GEOFFREY PITTOCK-BUSS |
| FENNER BROCKWAY      | ETHEL MANNIN          |

FOR SOLIDARITY WITH THE THREE  
IMPRISONED ANARCHISTS





