

A May Day in Prison.

by Joseph M. Coldwell †

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Once more we celebrate the International Labor Day, May 1st, called May Day by many. In some places we have parades, picnics, dances and almost in every town and hamlet where there are a group of radicals a meeting of some kind will be held. This is done to show our international solidarity, to show that labor of every land and language has agreed that May 1st shall be known as Labor Day, not by the grace of God, or by act of parliament, but by the power of class solidarity.

To the class conscious worker, wherever he may be, on land or on the seas, sick or well, imprisoned or at liberty, May 1st calls to him the memories of the struggles of the past and the hopes of the future, as does no other day of the year. The master class have tried in vain to stop this expression of international solidarity, but the more they oppress us the greater is our determination to celebrate, to show in some way that this day is different from other days.

In some countries public demonstrations are forbidden, but you may rest assured that the comrades will have some kind of a demonstration that will put their hearts in tune with the workers of the world. Even in prison they cannot stop this spirit from expressing itself. I have spent three May Days in prison

MY LIFE IN PRISON WITH DEBS

A LECTURE BY
JOSEPH M. COLDWELL

Joseph M. Coldwell, prominent New England strike leader and Socialist worker, and Eugene V. Debs were recently released from Atlanta, Ga., Federal Prison, after serving more than two years for violation of the infamous so-called Espionage Law.

—OPEN THE PRISON DOORS for the scores of other workers—class-war prisoners still lying in America's dungeons for standing by THEIR class.

Hear Coldwell's stirring story of life in prison with Debs.

JOSEPH M. COLDWELL

I.W.O.

†- Joseph Maurice Coldwell was born in 1869 and was active in socialist and labor politics from the 1890s. He played a major role in the 1912 Lawrence textile strike as well as a 1913 strike of Draper Textile Machine Co. workers in Hopedale, MA. Coldwell was twice jailed for strike-related activity during this period. He was a longtime member of the Socialist Party of America and a delegate to 1917 St. Louis Convention of the SPA from Rhode Island. Coldwell was arrested in Jan. 1918 in Providence for violation of Espionage Act for making the statement that "war is organized murder." He went to trial in Providence and was sentenced on July 6, 1918 to a term of 3 years in the Federal Penitentiary. While out pending appeal, Coldwell was a candidate for SPA National Executive Committee in 1919, finishing in the balloting far behind the anointed candidates of the organized Left Wing Section in his district — Louis C. Fraina, Nicholas Hourwich, and Edward Lindgren. Coldwell was a founding member of the Communist Labor Party in August of that same year. He was imprisoned under his Espionage Act conviction on Oct. 27, 1919, and served his time at Atlanta Federal Penitentiary as prisoner no. 10,057. Coldwell was released from Atlanta on Christmas Day, 1921, his sentence commuted by President Harding. Coldwell was a member of the Workers Party of America from the time of his release, but eventually migrated back to the Socialist Party, for whom he stood as a candidate for Governor of Rhode Island in 1934 and for US Senate in 1936. He remained active in the socialist movement until his death on April 3, 1949.

and I know whereof I speak. One of those May Days I was alone, the only radical in that prison, but I put on a little bow of red ribbon and wore it proudly and explained to my fellow prisoners who asked me why I was wearing it the meaning of May Day. The two other May Days I spent in prison was in the Federal prison at Atlanta, Ga., and I was not alone. There were many of us, paying the penalty of the law, prisoners of war, held by the enemy in that bastille of American capitalism.

One year May Day happened to come on one of the days that we were allowed the privilege of going in the yard for the afternoon. We passed the word to the radicals to meet at a certain place, which was at the T.B. Camp, where the consumptives lived behind a barbed wire stockade. One of the group was a consumptive and was confined there. The three Russian boys, [Jacob] Abrams, [Samuel] Lippman, and [Hyman] Lachowsky, Spike Moore and Jack Randolph of the IWW, Gene Debs, Nick Zogg, and several others whose names I cannot recall just now were there. Lachowsky brought his violin and furnished the music. We sang "The Internationale" and "The Red Flag."

Spike Moore, who was artistic, drew the words of a revolutionary motto in the sandy soil and that was our banner. Many prisoners passing by stopped to look at the words that were printed in the sand and

then they would look at us and smile. That was our May Day celebration and we enjoyed it, perhaps more than you will enjoy your celebration in gaily decorated halls. It may seem simple to you who know nothing about life in a prison, but to us it meant much. For one thing, it meant going to "the Hole" if one of the 110 Percent patriotic guards should feel like reporting us. You may be able to imagine how "terrible" our simple little celebration would sound when a 110 Percenter reported that we were singing "The Red Flag."

But we were not reported and we felt that we were one with our comrades outside who were celebrating International Labor Day. The group that sang "The Red Flag" are at liberty now, except Nick Zogg; he is still there doing a 10 year "bit."†

I think of the other class war prisoners who are spending May Day behind the bars, Mooney and Billings, Sacco and Vanzetti, and the many victims of the "criminal syndicalism" laws. They are prisoners of war, held by the enemy. We must do something to get them out. Think of them when you sing

"With heads uncovered, swear we all
To bear it onward till we fall.
Come dungeons dark or gallows grim,
This song shall be our parting hymn."

†- Nicholas S. Zogg, a civil engineer and anarchist, was convicted in Los Angeles of violating the so-called Espionage Act. He was incarcerated at McNeil Island Penitentiary on October 15, 1918. As a tuberculosis patient, Zogg was transferred to Atlanta Penitentiary to be quarantined with others suffering the disease. Zogg was the last federal inmate under the World War I Espionage and Sedition Acts to gain his freedom. He was finally released in June 1924.

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Insert: June 1922 WPA leaflet promoting a Joseph Coldwell lecture. Copy in Davenport collection.

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