
13,000 Cheer Hillquit in Mail Ban Protest: Socialists Overflow Madison Square Garden at Big Meeting: Hisses for Burleson and Mayor Mitchel [event of Oct. 14, 1917]

Published in *The New York Tribune*, vol. 77, whole no. 25,901 (Oct. 15, 1917), pp. 1, 14.

Thirteen thousand persons, at least a third of them women, at a mass meeting at Madison Square Garden last night stood on their seats, waved red flags, and strained their throats in protesting against the war and the Post Office Department in suppressing Socialist newspapers and in threatening to suppress *The New York Call*.

They hissed Postmaster General [Albert S.] Burleson. They supplemented their boos for Mayor [John Purroy] Mitchel with cries of "Down with Mitchel!" They hissed the war, applauded vociferously the mention of peace, and evidenced their approval when S. John Block, the chairman, declared that "for every copy of a Socialist newspaper denied the use of the second class mail, 50 copies should be sent through the first class mail."

The demonstration was carried on in the streets by the people who were unable to get in. The waiting crowd, after Madison Square Garden was filled to capacity, extended, two persons abreast, for twelve blocks in a serpentine line up and down and through the cross streets from 24th Street to 30th Street. It was estimated that 8,000 persons stood outside. They echoed the cheering that came from within the building, but dispersed quietly when 150 policemen brought word that the hall was filled.

Ovation for Hillquit.

Morris Hillquit, Socialist candidate for mayor, who declared that "so long as *The Call* continued to be published it would serve the

workers in opposing the war,” received an ovation which lasted 14 minutes. He faces a sea of waving red flags, while the stamping of feet on the wooden chairs blended in the chorus of cheers. The whole audience began to sing:

“Hylan is bad, Mitchel is worst;
We want Hillquit, safety first.”

Hillquit, after explaining that the publisher of *The Call* had been summoned to appear at 2 pm today before the authorities in Washington to show cause why its second class mailing privileges should not be withdrawn, asserted that the demonstration “was loud enough to be heard in Washington as a notice to the Post Office Department to show cause why the constitutional rights of the people should not be permitted to live.”

His reference to Postmaster Burluson as “a prolific accuser, merciless judge, and prompt executioner, all in one,” evoked another outburst.

Opposition to the repressive measures taken by the Post Office Department against all Socialist newspapers, in English as well as in foreign languages, appeared as soon as Chairman Block announced the purpose of the meeting. On a banner over the platform was emblazoned this quotation from Thomas Jefferson:

“Our object should be to leave open all avenues of truth. As the most effectual hitherto found has been the press, it is therefore the first shut up by those who fear investigation of their actions.”

Booes and hisses intermingled as soon as Mr. Block mentioned the Post Office Department. “We are here to protest against the abrogation of our constitutional rights of freedom of the press,” he said. “The Postmaster General—”

That was enough for the audience. Thousands of pairs of hands formed themselves into megaphones, and the chorus of booes began. It was soon changed into a cry for “a free press.” Red flags were whipped from pockets and everybody stood up.

At his mention of *The American Socialist*, *The Masses*, *The New-yorker Volkszeitung*, the German-language Socialist newspaper, and Socialist organs published in Bohemian [Czech] and Russian, which

either have been suppressed or have received a warning from the Post Office Department, Chairman Block received rounds of applause.

“The Post Office Department is working on the theory that a little knowledge for the workers is a dangerous thing,” he said. “A little more knowledge will be a dangerous thing for our autocratic politicians. Let them go on! Every effort they make to weaken us only makes us stronger. Nicholas Romanov would feel perfectly at home in our Post Office Department. It is the only place in the world where he would feel at home. We have had enough of Mr. Burleson.”

Lore Refuses “To Be Good.”

Ludwig Lore, editor of the *Volkszeitung*, who was introduced as being “no more pro-German than Karl Liebknecht,” said his paper had refused to reply to the warning of the Post Office Department.

“We were summoned to appear because we said this was a capitalistic war,” he said. “We refuse to take back one word of what we said, and we refuse to be good in the future. We are not pro-German — not as pro-German as some of the officials at Washington. When the war is over the militarists at Washington and Berlin will be again shaking hands and exchanging kisses.”

Chairman Block came forth to announce that “our stylish Mayor Mitchel” had said that he (the Mayor) was the only person who could make political speeches from the steps of the city Hall. “After January 1 it will be our Socialist Mayor who will make speeches from those steps,” he said.

Charles W. Ervin, editor of *The Call*, said he wanted to send this message to “the lords of misrule”:

“We shall continue to be uncompromising. We will not equivocate or yield an inch. We will be heard. The best circulation man on the staff of *The Call* is Postmaster Burleson. We will have our circulation increased by 20,000 because of his action.

James H. Maurer, of the Pennsylvania State Federation of Labor, extolled the IWW. He said its members were fighting for the betterment of the working classes. “And soon,” he said, “the American Federation of Labor will be where the IWW now is if it keeps on the way it has been going.”

Assemblyman [Abraham] Shiplacoff said that he has also lived in Russia, having come here 14 years ago, and said he could not see that this country is superior to Russia.

“If the government in this country keeps on like it has for the past few months,” said Mr. Shiplacoff, “the same elements that fought Bismarck in 1848 [*sic.*] and fought Tsarism in Russia will be starting the same thing here.”

Eugene V. Debs sent a telegram saying that “the fight to sustain *The Call* should be waged by every friend of freedom in America.”

Three Post Office inspectors, representatives of the United States District Attorney’s office, and other Federal officials were present to listen to the speeches.

Mr. Hillquit’s Speech.

Mr. Hillquit’s speech follows:

“*The New York Call*, the spokesman of Socialism and organized labor in this city, has been ordered by the Post Office authorities in Washington to show cause why its second class mailing privileges should not be withdrawn. The hearing has been set for tomorrow. The execution has probably been set for next Thursday or Friday.

“From my sad experience in similar cases, I assert that the so-called hearing is a farce and that *The Call* is definitely and irrevocably doomed.

“The revocation of the second class mailing rights means that *The Call* will lose practically all circulation outside of New York. The measure is intended to cripple and if possible to destroy the paper.

“I maintain that the proceeding is without any sanction in law and that it is a flagrant violation of the most fundamental constitutional rights of American citizenship.

“The so-called espionage law, whose provisions are invoked to cover the autocratic *ukase* of the Postmaster General, was enacted to prevent active and forcible obstruction of the conduct of the war and willful aid to the enemy. It was never intended as an instrument for the suppression of political views on war or peace or the stifling of criticism of government policies. Acts, not opinions, fall under the ban of the law.

Defends *The Call*’s Course.

“*The New York Call* has at no time violated or counseled or encouraged the violation of any provision of the espionage law or any other law. It has at all times voice the sentiments of its read-

ers and followers against war and for peace, and that it will continue doing, in spite of all un-American edicts of the Post Office Department.

"The Call has been ordered to show cause why its mailing rights should not be revoked, but the Post Office Department has not made the slightest attempt to show cause why such rights should be revoked. Not a single article, sentence, or phrase ever printed in *The Call* has been cited in support of the extraordinary proceeding against the paper. Not a single specific charge has been formulated against it. No opportunity has been afforded to the paper to defend itself.

"The third assistant to the Postmaster General, a person never elected by the people and totally unknown to the people, is the sole accuser, judge, and execution of the people's organs of public expression. He is a prolific accuser, a merciless judge, and a prompt executioner.

"His axe began to fall first upon the weekly opposition papers. In their case the withdrawal of the mailing rights meant complete and immediate destruction. Then came the Socialist daily papers in rapid succession — *The Milwaukee Leader*, the Hungarian *Előre*, the Russian *Novyi Mir*, the German *Volkszeitung*, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and finally *The Call*. And the great people of the great American Republic stand silent and passive before this boldest of all attacks upon the most vital of the rights and liberties. This is the great tragedy of it.

"There is no reason to believe that the crusade of extermination will stop at the Socialist press. Emboldened by the passive acquiescence of the people, our Post Office bureaucracy may extend the ban to all publications that dare to disagree with the politics of the Administration or to criticize public officials, and if permitted to do so under the pretext of a war measure it may continue the lawless practice in times of peace.

"In the face of this grave menace to the freedom of the American press there is but one organized force, one political party in the whole country that has the courage to raise its voice in public protest, warning, and condemnation — the party of the Socialists.

Socialists Accept Challenge.

"In attempting to suppress our publications the powers that be are challenging the Socialist movement. We accept the challenge.

"The Call will lose several thousand readers out of town by withholding of its mailing right. Let us get for our paper 10,000

new readers in the city for every thousand lost in the country. We can do it. The Post Office Department has made the task easy.

“The short-sighted Washington bureaucracy expects to stamp out the Socialist movement by destroying its organs of expression. Vain and silly endeavor. The Socialist movement cannot be killed. Its great ideals of human liberty and social justice cannot be suppressed, its lofty spirit of brotherhood cannot be stifled, The Socialist movement thrives and grows and wins under persecution.

“The tyrants of Europe have learned this lesson, to their sorrow. The German Kaiser and the Russian Tsar have tried it. They have outlawed the Socialist gospel and suppressed all Socialist publications for many years. Germany’s 4 million Socialists are today the greatest menace of German autocracy, and Russian socialism rules the Russian republic.

“There is, however, one great and fundamental difference between the autocratic regimes of Europe and our American democracy.”

The crowd outside and the audience apparently started homeward, but 3,000 formed a column which marched on Fifth Avenue to the Union League Club. In front of the club they stopped and called out, “Down with capitalists, give us free press!”

The marchers continued to the Waldorf-Astoria and the McAlpin and repeated their calls of “Down with capitalists!” Then they went through 33rd Street to Seventh Avenue. Here they met a squad of soldiers on their way back to Yaphank.

When the soldiers learned the purpose of the shouts they started a little war on their own account. The marchers were soon dispersed.

Edited by Tim Davenport

1000 Flowers Publishing, Corvallis, OR · November 2013 · Non-commercial reproduction permitted.