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# First Authentic News of Cleveland May Day Demonstration

by Hortense Wagenknecht †

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*This is the first news of May Day in Cleveland to reach us from official Socialist sources. It was written by Hortense Wagenknecht, temporary State Secretary of the Socialist Party of Ohio, an eyewitness.*

This report is as accurate as we can make at this time, as to numbers reported hurt and arrested at the May Day demonstration in Cleveland. No information was given out at police headquarters up to noon Friday [May 2, 1919]. No charges were at that time placed against either [Lawrence] Zitt or [C.E.] Ruthenberg, although a number of foreign [language-speaking] comrades were arraigned in police court, charged with disorderly conduct, and fined either \$25 or sentenced to the workhouse for 30 days. Attempts were made by dozens of wives and mothers to get some word as to their missing husbands and sons at police station all of May Day evening and night. All were told that the police were too busy to take up their complaint at that time. About 9:30 o'clock in the evening a few names were given us as some of the num-



ber who had been examined by officials.

The Socialists assembled at 5 different points in outlying sections of Cleveland. From these points they were to march to the Public Square where the speaking was to be held in the afternoon and a parade of the entire crowd was then to form at the Square, march through the business section, back to the Square, and then to the various halls for the evening's entertainments.

All parades were formed as per arrangement and started toward the Square promptly at 12:30 o'clock from the different sections of the city. No trouble was reported at the places where the marchers formed. All parades carried American flags, also the Socialist banners, marchers had small red ribbons pinned upon their coats, and most of them carried small red pennants in their hands. Hundreds of signs were carried with such slogans as "We are against child labor," "We are for the dictatorship of the proletariat," "We believe the soldiers should be given work," etc. The kinds of slogans that anyone would expect in a Socialist parade.

†- Hortense Allison was born Jan. 14, 1887 in Warsaw, Missouri. In 1899 she and her older brother, Elmer (later the editor of the *Ohio Socialist* and a founding member of the Communist Labor Party), moved with her mother to Washington state. In 1905 she married a young Socialist organizer named Alfred Wagenknecht in Seattle; her husband would later become the Executive Secretary of the CLP and the United Communist Party. In 1919, Hortense briefly served as temporary State Secretary of the Socialist Party of Ohio. After shuttling between Ohio and New York City, Alfred and Hortense Wagenknecht wound up living in Connecticut for much of the 1920s. She was a Communist Party Presidential elector in 1932. About 1933, after her divorce from Alfred Wagenknecht, Hortense moved to Long Beach, California. She was the CPUSA's candidate for California State Assembly in the 71st District of California in 1934. She lived variously in Washington and Michigan in the 1940s and 1950s, ultimately taking back her maiden name. She died in Olympia, WA on May 28, 1975.

While the marchers were peaceably making their ways toward the Square, thousands were gathering at the Square to view [the parade and to] hear the speeches. At 12:00 o'clock the crowd there almost equaled that which gathered the day that the report of PEACE was flashed across the country. But it was a different crowd altogether. Whereas, the Peace demonstration was considered by most as a lucky holiday, where no one had to work and all could wander about for the whole day with nothing to do, the May Day gathering at the Square was almost entirely of interested persons, who really had a purpose in view. The crowd was orderly; in fact, too quiet for Labor's Holiday. The very atmosphere was tense. Very little talking was to be heard. The workers were not even in groups, but each seemed to be heard there as an individual, who wanted to see and hear, unmolested. An atmosphere of suspicion prevailed. Anyone could tell, after walking about for 5 minutes that these were not men who aligned themselves with the Socialist movement, but on would have been blind indeed who could not have told where their sympathies lay.

An hour and a half of the tensest watching and waiting passed. The crowd grew more suspicious as the moments dragged and no parade appeared. Then, like a clap of thunder from a clear sky, a battalion of mounted police dashed through the crowd, making to the east side of the Square. Traffic was always congested so that no semblance of order prevailed. Street cars were clanging, and trucks honking, when above the din of it all the strains of a band were heard. One mighty roar went up from the assemblage. Everyone threw up his hands and cheered, as the Russian comrade on a white horse leading the parade came into view. As a single person, the crowd moved to get a better view of the marchers. One did not need to be told that this crowd was of the working class, whose hearts were beating to the tramp of the marchers. Faces that had been white and tense for more than an hour and a half now were wreathed in smiles of happiness. A breath of the Revolution of the old world seemed to have passed through the Square, and all were glad. All breathed this for a moment only, and then —

Well, then the mounted police made another dash — this time for the division of the Square where the speakers' stand was located.

Cheering changed to screams as this charge was

made into the crowd which blocked the entire southwest corner of the Square. War trucks and *<line illeg.>* the people, who fled in every direction to escape being killed. Police emergency autos poured into the Square as the crowd surged first one way and then another, as fist fighting began in all sections.

Police, both on horse and afoot, assisted by APLs [American Protective Leaguers] and soldiers, battled with drawn clubs in all sections of the lower half of the Square. Mounted police dashed back and forth through Superior Avenue, in a desperate attempt to keep traffic moving and to make way for the ambulances and patrol wagons that came and went, carrying the injured and arrested. Patrolmen were dragged from their horses and horses riding about riderless, added to the confusion. The workers were clubbed by the mounted police in a vain attempt to make way for traffic.

Army trucks and tanks, with the aid of the mounted police, kept the speakers' stand clear, allowing no one near that portion of the Square. No more than 200 of the marchers in the parade ever entered the Square. Army trucks faced the line of march and plowed right into the parade. These same tactics were used in the various places as the marchers neared the Square. Without warning of any kind, the parades were ridden into in the most brutal manner.

In one instance an army truck headed direct for the portion of the parade where the Socialist Sunday School children were in line. Only by the most heroic efforts of the men and women in front and behind these little ones were they saved. At this same place a police emergency [vehicle] ran over a man.

Women as well as men were clubbed by the police, and told to go home where they belonged. They were dragged about by the police, and horses were driven so closely upon them that the horses' feet pulled off their rubbers.

Those who attacked the marchers in every instance we can learn of, were not the bystanders, but police, detectives, APLs, soldiers, sailors, and hoodlums, who were selected for the work beforehand. These last were in the main youths from the ages of about 14 to 25 years, and many were drunk. Soldiers stood about in groups in many sections, pointing out to these ruffians who were willing to do their bidding, any who appeared to be "Reds" or who had on red ties

or badges. These were torn from the persons wearing them, and if protest was made by the wearer, the soldiers rushed to the spot and a free-for-all fight ensued. Hundreds of men were without hats and collars, and showed the marks of having their ties removed by these defenders of DEMOCRACY. Streets and sidewalks were strewn with bits of red cloth, with here and there splatterings of blood.

There were a number of instances where policemen remained human beings throughout their work, but these were not in the majority, by any means. In every instance, the person attacked by the ruffians and soldiers was taken away in the patrol [car], but never those who did the attacking. These were left to continue their work of slugging.

Because those at the Square were the unorganized sympathizers and not the parades of the organized movement accounts for much. We dare say there would have been a different story to tell had the organized paraders been allowed to get to the Square. None of the thousands of paraders knew what was going on at the Square.

No less than 50,000 persons were at the Square and in the parades. Friendly police admitted that it surpassed anything they ever experienced, or ever hoped to experience again. It was only by brutal force, and the assistance of the hundreds of trucks that they were able to disperse the crowds.

Socialist headquarters at 1222 Prospect Avenue was demolished. Comrades stood by and saw the man who threw the first brick through the window. He was the dirtiest, vilest bum imaginable. When the comrades asked the police who also witnessed the throw to arrest the man, or to *illeg.* the police laughed and said, "You go home where you belong." Hundreds of dollars' worth of property was destroyed while the police looked on.

Late in the evening, Acme Hall, occupied by the Socialist Liedertaffel, was partially wrecked. The wife

of a member of the club was there at the time, having gone there to attend the May Day Entertainment. A policeman asked here what she wanted and she told him. He said, "There won't be any entertainment here tonight; you go home." As she went out of the door she was met by a crowd of boys with clubs. The policeman said, "All right, boys, you can come in." The place had previously been ordered closed by the police. We have good reason to believe this woman's statement, and no other has been made to the contrary.

Newspapers state that those heading the parade, including the soldier who carried the red flag, got upon the speakers' stand. These are still in jail and we do not know the truth of this statement. From a comrade who was released we learned that none of the 60 who were in with him, including Ruthenberg and Zitt, were badly hurt, some having been slightly injured. Rumors at police headquarters are that a very serious charge is to be placed against the comrades who organized and led the paraders. These may be merely rumors, started for the purpose of intimidating the workers. But we feel quite sure they will not be intimidated.

In the words of an onlooker, we say, "With persecution will come a REVOLUTION."

Papers reported 2 persons killed and more than 200 wounded and 134 arrested.

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Later: Ruthenberg reported released on \$1,000 bond. Joe Chanes, an active Russian Socialist, went to post office Friday afternoon [May 2, 1919] for Local Cleveland mail, and on his way back was beaten into insensibility.

(Note: C.E. Ruthenberg and Tom Clifford were on May 9 charged with "Assault with intent to kill," because of speeches made in anticipation of May Day. They were released on bond pending a preliminary hearing.)

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.*

*Photo of Hortense Allison Wagenknecht (1905) courtesy of Judith Allison Walters.*

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