

Debs' Speech Threatened the Rulers

Much Like Today's Anti-War Agitation

Julie Herrada

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FE Note: As we write, the U.S. is in the final stages of preparation for its imperial invasion and occupation of Iraq, so the question posed in the upper right headline may be in the first stages of being answered.

A look into a past period of powerful resistance and radical agitation against imperialist war is instructive. Already, far-right-wing talk show hosts are advocating that the 1917 Sedition Act be used to silence anti-war demonstrators.

In 1917, shortly after the U.S. entered World War I, Democratic President Woodrow Wilson signed the Espionage Act which, among other provisions, prohibited any person from "causing or attempting to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, refusal of duty in the military or naval forces of the United States, or willfully obstructing the recruiting or enlistment service of the United States."

In addition, the law contained a conspiracy clause prohibiting persons acting in concert to carry out the above offenses. Conviction under the law carried a penalty of up to twenty years imprisonment and a \$10,000 fine.

Immigrants who were convicted were deported. This was the fate of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Radicals such as Big Bill Haywood, Kate Richards O'Hare, Molly Steimer and hundreds of others were imprisoned. (While out on bail Haywood fled to Russia and never returned.)

The period leading up to the U.S. entry into the essentially European conflict was one of wide spread opposition to the war and militant labor organizing. Most people at the time understood the purpose of the law to be directed at the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), anarchists, socialists, and other labor radicals.

The law also declared that anyone who "uttered, printed, wrote or published any disloyal, profane, scurrilous or abusive language" about the United States could be prosecuted. Scant evidence was often presented for convictions, and the law's language open-ended enough that interpretation of interfering with the draft, and encouraging young men not to register was such that one anti-war activist was imprisoned under its terms for distributing copies of the Bill of Rights.

As the war ended and the 1920s began, most of those imprisoned were released before their sentences were completed. Ironically, it was Republican President Warren G. Harding, considered by many to be the most corrupt President in U.S. history who pardoned most of the imprisoned radicals. The deportees, however, were not pardoned. Many, such as Emma Goldman, remained stateless for the rest of their lives.

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