

Vermont People's Front, 1776-1936

JACK WILGUS

RUTLAND.

IN Vermont there are very clear indications that the cohorts of fascism are forming. First indications occurred last spring when the leaders in the American Legion opened a drive in Barre, which they termed the "Red center of Vermont." At the same time the Legion and Elks moved through the state legislature to have the Communist Party stricken from the ballot. This was stopped by mass pressure and by the appearance before the legislature of Mayor John Gordon of Barre in behalf of the rights of free speech. The Legion-Elks drive in Barre met empty response, the leaders nearly empty halls. And again Mayor Gordon stood up and defended the constitutional rights of the Communist Party to maintain quarters and activities in the city of Barre. He stated that any attacks upon the Communists or Socialists are attacks on the whole labor movement.

The five marble towns now on strike appeared just a few months ago, quiet, orderly, typically New England and "far from the madding crowd." Starvation wages and the demand that their union be recognized brought on the class war which has turned those villages into strongholds which appear at the present time to be almost impregnable. The Vermonters show themselves fierce strikers. Their combat forces and flying squadrons cannot be halted by the great force of company police and sheriffs, and those servants of the rich Proctor interests resort to slugging and terrorizing only under cover of night, retreating when the alarm calls forth the people of the towns. Thus far the first marble strike to have occurred in Vermont is gaining and militant. Assistance, both physical and financial, has come quickly forth from every union local in the state and from large numbers of farmers. From all over the east response to the call for financial assistance has been surprisingly fine. But the forces of the law, the press and finance have now been augmented by what are called "The Minutemen of Vermont," newly set-up vigilantes with the avowed purpose of "smashing the trade unions in Vermont."

The strikers have been quick in dealing with the vigilantes. Wherever the vigilantes have gathered there have been union men somewhere in the halls. When the Minutemen informed their storm troopers that upon the sharp blast three times of the fire whistle in Proctor they must gather for an attack on the pickets, day or night, the unions called mass meetings and told the men they likewise must respond en masse when they heard the fire whistle give the alarm and to concentrate on whatever town the call came from, in flying squadrons.

The officials of the Vermont Marble Company laid in wait to catch any Communists they could detect. Two armed deputies with revolvers in their hands stepped before a car I was driving into Proctor and getting on the running-boards, instructed me to drive to the Company Barracks. They held me five hours during which time I was constantly cross-examined and threatened. They told me that mass picketing of all the people, men, women and children in the towns involved must be stopped, because "the law can't handle picket lines with women and children in the mobs." I was told that if I was ever seen there again "men who aren't so gentle as we are will take you in hand." Then I was turned over to States Attorney Bloomer. He gave me just twenty-four hours to leave Rutland County and said in answer to a question I put to him, "We don't need no law. But I won't be responsible for what may happen to you if you are caught here after twenty-four hours." I told the editor of The Rutland Herald of this illegal arrest and my having been held incommunicado and the threat of what would happen if I did not get out. He said he would certainly put the news in his paper, but first he must hear the States Attorney's story. Nothing relating to this instance has ever appeared in the paper. I am still in Rutland County, watched and often followed, but I have addressed a mass meeting and gone about unmolested.

The newspaper, at first playing the game of impartial observer, is doing exactly what the national press did leading up to the World War, the trick which made me a soldier in 1917-18. Little by little they are turning against the strikers. Pictures of bandaged heads and smashed houses, atrocity stories, violence headlines, editorial horror stories, always against the strikers, but seldom against the night riders who terrorize the workers and the brutal assaults upon strikers by company thugs. They are systematically endeavoring to build up sentiment against the striking marble and quarry workers of what has proved thus far to be the impregnable five towns.

Many miles to the north, in Newport, men gathered together and formed a W.P.A. union, the fourth in the state. They met in a poolroom. After they had been in session a half hour the chief of police arrived. He gave the organizer from Barre just fifteen minutes in which to leave town. A few days later the poolroom proprietor had his license revoked and the mayor of Newport published a statement in the paper that any man joining the W.P.A. union would not only lose his relief, but would also be sentenced to jail. The union still goes on and

grows, in Newport, with every force of terror and intimidation let loose on the membership and their families.

A Strikers' Civil Rights Committee has been set up in Manchester, Vermont, and is expanding. They published their proclamation in defense of the strikers on the front pages of recent Vermont papers, in large boxes. As they are very prominent middle-class and professional Vermonters this has elicited no end of editorial gasps and snorts, but no overt criticisms. For the first time farmers and prominent citizens have joined the forces of labor in this state.

Out of the strike has sprung the Vermont Farmer-Labor Party, sponsored by the State Federation of Labor, and starting in small hamlets and towns here and there to be knit together later in a state convention. Forces are thus clearly dividing between Vermont reactionaries of the cheap Coolidge tradition and the progressive elements.

On Armistice Day a United Front mass meeting of over 800 gathered in little Middlebury and in the United Front against war and fascism were such organizations as the Legion Post and the women's club and local merchants' association and the farm grange. At the same time, clear across the state, in Windsor, the school children voted unanimously not to support their country in any war it might undertake. And in this same small town the Rotary Club invited the Vermont Communist Organizer to speak before them and tell them just what the Communists are doing and aim to do in America. He was more than favorably received by townspeople who are nearly as badly off as the workers.

Every day a bombshell bursts. Papers come out in defense of the unions or in attacks, people of prominence take definite sides, the Socialist locals of one county call for the United Front with the Communists, while those on the other side of the state, attack us. Labor leaders Red-bait, and other labor leaders come to our support. There are leaders in the strike who are militant and fast learning from struggle and those who show sharp cleavage from militancy. There was the minister who sharply astounded people for miles around by stating in his pulpit that he would invite a Communist to speak in his place one of these Sundays and there are the pulpiteers who come out and shout that labor wants war so it can turn the forces of violence into channels helpful to the overthrow of the existing order. So fast are forces shifting or lining up that one has all he can do to keep from being bewildered. Zero weather and white hills bring no sleep to stirring centers of action in old Vermont today.

How "Under Fire" Was Published

SIMONE TERY

I DO NOT doubt that the day in 1916 when I first saw Henri Barbusse marks an important date in the life of Barbusse and in the history of mankind.

My father, Gustave Tery, one of the great French polemicists, had founded *L'Oeuvre*, a daily newspaper. He had been maddened to see every day in the academic newspapers "the old gentlemen" gayly encouraging young people to go and kill for civilization and What is Right. He thought that civilization and What is Right was not where these official journalists, these comfortable old men, feigned to see it; and that it was time that the feelings of the soldiers in the trenches and all the poor people of France whose sons, husbands and brothers the war was slaughtering, who could bear no more of misery and sadness, should be expressed. It was in order to tell the truth—at least as far as the terrible censorship would allow—that he had established *L'Oeuvre*.

I was not very big at the time. I was a boarding student at a Lycee at Versailles, where I studied; and I had a holiday every fifteen days to go to see my father in Paris. But he was terrifically busy and most often, after having embraced me, he told me to wait in a corner of his office and I remained there, making myself insignificant, as wise as a mouse. But there was nothing to stop me from watching the goings and comings or from listening to what the people, my father's collaborators and visitors, said.

One day I saw a soldier enter who appeared immense to me. He was so thin that his skyblue soldier's coat, discolored by the rain and dirt, twice too big for him, floated on his large body and beat against the calves of his legs. On his face, pale and wasted away, with its long thin nose, one could read sweetness, sorrow, resolution. He had above all a striking appearance. In his clear eyes, full of dreams, there surged suddenly an anguished look, which would be extinguished and would burst forth anew, like the beacon of a light house.

Barbusse went across the room in three long steps, his body a bit bent over, and threw on my father's desk a large manuscript, like a longshoreman dropping his load.

"There," he said. "I have brought you *Under Fire*."

"What is it?" my father asked.

"It is a book on the war," replied Barbusse. "It has been refused by all the newspapers in Paris. They have treated me as a defeatist. I have used the few days of my ve in fruitlessly walking the streets. In

an hour I return to the front. You are my last hope. They tell me that you have founded a newspaper to tell the truth. Do you wish my *Under Fire* then?"

Barbusse was at that time a little known journalist. My father looked at him for a long time. He was a discoverer of men. He saw that he had before him a real man.

"So you have spoken the truth?" he said, "We will listen."

"I tell of the life of the soldiers in the trenches and of their death. The others speak of their 'glory,' of the pleasure which young men have in dying for Civilization and What is Right, I speak of what I have seen, of that which I have come up against, of the dirt, the lice, the blood and the filth, of youngsters who call for their mothers during hours of agony caught on barbed wire. I speak of the brutal savagery of the war."

"I see," said my father.

He opened the book at random and read two or three pages. For a long time there was a great silence. Barbusse was seated all doubled up, his elbows cutting his knees, his head leaning forward. I scarcely dared move. You could hear a fly buzzing. Suddenly my father gave a long whistle and raised his head.

"Barbusse," he said in a deep voice, "I think that you have written the book I am waiting for, that all France is waiting for. Without reading further, I can say immediately that *Under Fire* will appear in *L'Oeuvre*."

Barbusse got up with a bound. Without a word he clasped my father's hand violently. He was too moved to speak. Neither was father able to say anything further. The two men, with hands clasped, stood looking at each other. Then Barbusse turned and without a word went out of the room.

The reception of *Under Fire* was amazing. Never had a newspaper known such a success. In the trenches the soldiers fought over copies of *L'Oeuvre* in which the story was running. For the first time their feelings were at last expressed, by one of themselves, with a powerful realism and a dramatic restraint. It was written in a language raw and full of taste—their language.

But this was certain to be opposed by the censor and the authorities. The officers forbade the reading of *L'Oeuvre*. The police seized numbers of it in the kiosks and the censors carvassed the army. In the middle of the large white spaces in each number, set aside by the scissors of Anastasia (which was what the censor was called), my father printed a large picture of the beard of M.

Gautier, the chief of censorship. It was in the end a small war where cleverness, intelligence and talent fought for peace.

In several days Barbusse became famous. His novel, which soon appeared in book form, went through enormous editions. And I at the Versailles Lycee, hid under my mattress a copy of *Under Fire* with a book by Romain Rolland, and these I read in secret. It was with these two books that I entered into life, that I commenced to have a conscious understanding of things. And like me how many young girls, how many young boys of France!

Alas, I arrived in Moscow too late to see Barbusse alive for the last time. As I got off the train I learned that he had died.

The first day of my first visit to the U.S.S.R., the first thing that I saw was the face of Henri Barbusse. In 1916 he opened the doors of life to me; in 1935 I found him on the threshold of the Soviet Union. For the second time he opened to me the doors of a new life. Dead? No, not dead, but living in us.

And while I looked with sadness on his prophet's burning face, now cold, while there rages outside, like a human storm, the tide of International Young Communists, it seems to me in truth that we, the young people, have come to receive the word of command from the great one who has passed on.

We are taking up his work.

I Met a Man

I met a man the other day,
Gave him a lift—driving out his way.

He said:

(His hair was red)

"A man might's well be dead
As have no work to do."

(His eyes were soft bewildered blue;
His hands had bands of hard sinew.)

"God damn!" he cried,

"The world's cock-eyed!

Be jigged if they're not honing for

Another stinking bloody war!"

I stopped before his neat house door.

"There's so much in this world needs
mending;

Many fine jobs a man might be tending—
Roads, and waterworks, steelrail bending...

See that nice little bus you've got?

Well, I used to forge those frames by the
lot;

Can work a machinetool on the dot!"

(There was a break in his right shoe.)

"Thanks for the ride," he said; "thank
you."

IRVING FINEMAN.