

Stephen Daniels

In Memoriam of John Most

March 1913

The name of John Most is familiar throughout the country. But of the man himself, of his personality, ideas and struggles there persists the most false and grotesque conception. The very mention of the name pictures to the average citizen the incarnation of "Criminal Anarchy," and conjures up to the philistine imagination a dangerous conspirator against God, kings, presidents, capitalists — a man in compact with the devil of dynamite and nitroglycerine, an evil-doer that taxed all the watchfulness and power of the American government to keep him within the bounds of law and order. Did not, indeed, a great daily write during the last presidential campaign that "Most was the most dangerous character that ever ran amuck in this country," adding that Roosevelt, however, was even still more dangerous — a comparison, by the way, that does too much honor to Roosevelt.

That Most was regarded in this light was due to the fact that he was the first vigorous pioneer of Anarchist Communism in America. As such it was inevitable that he should become the target for all the vicious and malicious attacks on the part of those who stand for organized government, whose name is violence. It is hard to walk in untrodden paths. The pioneer must be prepared for the worst. He may devote all his energy, consecrate his whole life, to blaze a new path for civilization. He will generally receive recognition only after he has ceased to be.

At the time when Most came to America (in the fall of 1882) this country was more of a wilderness for the propagation of his ideas and ideals than it is to-day. Then the futility and barrenness of our political liberties as a means toward the necessary reconstruction of the social and economic life was not apparent in the degree that it is now. Almost absolute was the faith in the miraculous power of "free competition," which to-day the great majority realize to have become a plaything in the hands of the monopolists of the money and other trusts. The legend that in this country every industrious and able man could secure a comfortable existence, was then firmly believed; the assertion that here, no less than in other capitalist countries, there are exploited and oppressed classes, was in spite of all visible misery met with a smile of derision. Social questions, a militant labor movement, the proletariat and the social revolution might find justification for their existence in the be-nighted countries of Europe, it was popularly argued; here they could be treated only as empty phrases mouthed by the dissatisfied, restless and incompetent foreign elements.

This air of superiority America has gradually been forced to abandon. The social question is now as vital and burning in this republic as in Europe. It is beginning to be realized by ever growing numbers that a country, whose chief products are multi-millionaires and paupers, political corruption and economic misery, is not to be glorified as the best and most ideal society in the world.

As the petrel of the Social Revolution, Most had already gained considerable experience before he arrived in this country to continue the publication of the

Freiheit ("Freedom"). The existence of the paper had become impossible in England, through the persecution of the British authorities, behind whom was the Russian and German diplomatic influence to suppress Most. An article concerning the execution of Alexander II., in March, 1881, brought Most a sentence of sixteen months at hard labor. The two compositors of the *Freiheit*, both comrades, were also subsequently arrested and held for court. British freedom of the press proved as empty a boast as that of Germany and Austria, in which countries Most was repeatedly sent to prison for articles published in Social Democratic papers. But the English prison was even more severe and brutal.

Most left Germany for England in consequence of the Bismarckian anti-Socialist laws. He was of the opinion that the party should refuse to submit to the law that muzzled all free expression, holding that a more consequent and energetic propaganda could be carried on from abroad than in Germany itself, where Draconian police regulations suppressed every Social Democratic publication and dissolved every Socialist meeting.

This attitude brought our comrade in conflict with the leaders of the German Social Democratic party, who considered it more "practical" to adapt themselves to the Bismarck law. This diplomacy indeed contributed much toward making Socialism in Germany what it is today: compromising, bureaucratic, and sterilly State Socialistic.

To these disappointments which Most suffered in the German Social Democratic party was added his experience as a member of the Reichstag. There he saw machinery of parliamentarism at work, with all the trickery of law-making. He realized the uselessness of parliamentarism as a means of emancipating the proletariat, and it required only his acquaintance with the ideas of Bakunin, Reclus, and Kropotkin to awaken him to Anarchism, towards which his vigorous revolutionary spirit naturally leaned.

Most surely did not come to America expecting to find an Eldorado; yet with a certain affection for a land of republicanism. The traditions of the exiles of '48 were not yet dead, many of whom had found a refuge in America. But men and times had changed. A Carl Schurz could succeed in climbing the political ladder almost to its very top. But Most had brought with him a social ideal that no government and no political party, but only a liberty-loving, revolutionary people could realize. That was the great difference which resulted in the one being sent to prison, while the other was crowned with political laurels.

Most was an extremely powerful and effective popular speaker; as a writer he possessed great originality and a Rabelaisian wit that never failed to hit the mark.

Unique and highly entertaining in personal contact, he won many friends. Nevertheless, he had laboriously to hoe his path, because his character was of

the kind that can not adapt itself to the mechanical spirit of a centralized party machinery.

Similarly to the leaders of the German Social Democratic party who antagonized Most because of his strong and original personality, the foremost circles of the German Socialists in America hastened to excommunicate him. His path was therefore a thorny one, full of struggle and difficulties. He had constantly to fight against public opinion that was incited against him by the denunciation and misrepresentation of the hostile capitalist press, and soon the police made it a sort of specialty of arresting Most on every possible occasion and haling him to court. Newspaper reporters and journalists, whose ability as translators was more than doubtful, were in the habit of placing in his mouth the most ridiculous expressions, for which he was in all seriousness held responsible by the stupidity of the public and the courts. He was vilified, persecuted, and thrown into prison on general principles, so to speak, because he was the Anarchist Most.

To illustrate to the "native Americans" the nature and stupidity of that persecution, we shall recite a couple of incidents.

In a village of Long Island there had been arranged a picnic by the local German workers, on which occasion Most was an invited guest. The presence of the dangerous man aroused the authorities, who forthwith prepared to save the country. The police descended upon the assembly of picnickers, attacked them in a most brutal manner, and arrested a number of the participants, foremost among them Most. At the station the Chief gathered his police and detectives, making a speech to them, in which Most was characterized as the lowest dregs of hell, the Chief concluding with the order, "Whenever you happen to catch sight of this man in this district, arrest him at once and bring him to me." On another occasion Most, arriving in St. Louis to keep a lecture engagement, was pounced upon by the police and arrested without explanation or warrant, and forcibly taken to the Illinois border.

It is conceivable that the frequent sojourn in police stations, jails and prisons, did not serve to increase our comrade's love and respect for the Republic and its institutions. That these persecutions, instead of being perpetrated in the name of the Kaiser or Koenig, as in Germany or Austria, were in America masked with the "sovereignty of the people," served only to accentuate the hypocrisy of the American system of suppression and tyranny.

Notwithstanding all these miserable conditions, sharpened by poverty and need, Most bravely held aloft the banner of Anarchy, to the very end. He died at the age of 60, on March 17th, 1906, in Cincinnati, while on a lecture tour. His memory in the international revolutionary movement, in the great struggle for social justice and liberty, will remain green when the last trace of his petty and vicious persecutors has long been lost.

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August 8, 2012



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Originally Appeared in *Mother Earth* Vol. 8, no. 1.
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