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# The Cleveland Speech of May 27, 1917.

## A recounting for the jury.

by C.E. Ruthenberg

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Comrades and Friends:

We have here this afternoon witnessed an incident such as has happened in Russia on many occasions. No doubt, under the reign of the Tsar there have been many times when attempts have been made to stop the telling of the truth. There have been many occasions when those who are the servants of the ruling class in society have tried to prevent those who were fighting for the liberties of the people from uttering the things that they desired to state, and this afternoon we have here in the United States witnessed a thing which we have so often condemned in Russia, the land of darkness and dread things. But, in spite of this having taken place, I will proceed with my speech just as I proposed to make it to you before it happened. I am going to present to you my ideas, my thoughts, in regard to the present war and the things which the people of this country face at the present time. I am not going to appeal to your emotions; I am going to submit the facts for your consideration. I do not believe in appealing to your sentiments. I want you to consider the truth as men and women, thinking men and women, who wish to make this world a better place to live in for all of mankind.

A few days ago there was a call issued by certain workers for a conference in Stockholm, to be held for the purpose of endeavoring to find a common basis for ending this horrible war, for ending this thing which has cost the lives of millions of human beings, and through which other millions have been crippled and maimed and smashed beyond recognition as human beings — a conference was called by certain people to try to bring an end to this war. I am adverting to this now because it shows us how much truth there is in the statement that this nation is fighting a war for de-

mocracy. This conference was called by the workers of Belgium, the workers of Denmark, the workers of Norway and Sweden, to hold an international Socialist Conference, to find a basis for terms of peace and end this bloodshed and murder of human beings. All of these nations — the Belgian workers, the workers of France and of Germany and of Austria and Russia and England, all of the countries of Europe — yes, even Turkey and Bulgaria — are sending their delegates to this conference, to see if they cannot end this war, to end this awful murder of men and women; but there is one country which will not be represented at that conference. That is a country which is claiming that it is carrying on a fight for democracy. That is these United States, which has refused passports to a conference which has as its purpose to bring peace unto the world. That is the best answer to the question whether we are fighting a war for democracy or not.

My friends and comrades, this is not a war for democracy. This is not a war for freedom. It is not a war for the liberties of mankind. It is a war to secure the investments and the profits of the ruling class of this country, and I am going to show that to you. I am going to give you the facts so that you can judge for yourselves. Prior to the election of last November, from the date of the St. Louis convention of the Democratic Party to the November election, the spokesmen of this Democratic Party went up and down this country, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico, and they appealed to us to support and reelect the present administration, to put them back into office; and what did they tell us the reason why we should reelect the President and Congress? What did they offer as their chief ground for reelection to their places in the government of this

country? You know as well as I know that the chief appeal of the Democratic Party during this campaign was the cry: "He kept us out of war." He kept us out of this horrible thing in Europe, this chasm, this shambles, in which all that is good in our civilization is disappearing, in which all the kindness and humanity and the spirit of brotherhood which has grown up in the world is being wiped out of existence. The Democratic Party asked us to reelect its candidates for President and its Congress because we knew of this horrible thing, because we knew of this bloodshed, this crippling and maiming of human beings, and because we had an awful thing that was happening in Europe, and they said: "We kept you out of this war, so put us back into office." And what do they say now? They say now that they kept us out of a war for democracy and freedom. My friends, judge for yourselves. Judge for yourselves whether what they said before the election is the truth about this matter or what they say now is the truth about this matter. I am here to say to you that what they said before is the truth about the matter, and that the only reason we are in this war now is because it is to the interests of the ruling class, the capitalist class of this country to have us in this war, and I am going to show it to you. I am going to prove it to you. I am going to submit facts to you to prove this assertion.

In January of this year, according to the reports of this ruling class itself, there was a trade balance of \$5 billion in favor of the American capitalist class. In other words, they had exported to Europe, they had sent out of this country of the wealth we produced, which the sweat and labor of the people of this country brought into existence, they had sent out of this nation \$5 billion more than had come back into this country, and for this they had received gold, they had received stocks and bonds, they had received other things in exchange (and I say to you that never in the history of the world has there been a class which deserves more condemnation, which deserves more criticism, than the American capitalist class which saw in this struggle in Europe, in this killing and maiming and murdering, this bloodshed, this destruction, this wrecking of all that is good and beautiful — which saw in this thing only an opportunity for profit — I say to you that never in the world has there been a class which deserves more condemnation than the

American capitalist class, which desired nothing more than to make profits out of the murder of their fellow human beings). When in the spring of the year they saw their profits in danger through the fact that the German submarine menace became more serious, they found it necessary to use their power over the government of this country to hurl this nation into that war, not to fight for democracy, not to fight for freedom, but to fight for their profits, to fight for the loans which Morgan & Co. and their fellow capitalists had made to the Allies. They were reading and willing to send the youth of this nation into this horrible nightmare of murder, to kill and to be killed, in order that their profits might be conserved. That, my friends, is the cause of this war.

And they have done more than that. They have gone farther than that in this thing. For many years — yes, decades of time — it has been the spirit of this nation that compulsory military service was only possible in an autocratic country. We have looked across the waters and said that the people of Germany cannot be free because they are conscripted and forced to fight the battles of the ruling class. We have said the people of France and of Italy and of Russia cannot be a free nation as this country is a free nation, because they can be compelled to shoulder a gun and murder their fellow human beings, and today the government which has appealed to us because it kept us out of war, from which we have heard many beautiful platitudes about democracy, has put this most reactionary and autocratic law, the conscription law, on the books of this country.

My friends, I want to give you a picture of what conscription means.

**The Court:** Will it disturb you if we suspend at this point?

**Ruthenberg:** It will not.

**The Court:** You may resume at the point where you have stopped. We will take a recess.

*(Recess)*

**The Court:** You may resume your testimony at the point where you left off.

**Ruthenberg (Continuing):** I want to give you this picture by illustrating it through a story which has come to us from Europe, from one of the coun-

tries which is now involved in this war. A young man coming from a humble home had gone to this war, gone out into the struggle, into the bloodshed, into all that makes up this horrible thing we call war, and he had done what the newspapers said was a heroic deed.

**Mr. Wertz:** If the court please, is there any way of confining this testimony to what was offered here against this defendant as having said?

**The Court:** No, Mr. District Attorney. My ruling is already made, I will adhere to, which is that you have offered, as you had a right to offer, and should offer, his speech on the 27th of May [1917]. In the course of that speech certain things were said. As a result of those things, if not of the entire speech, the defendant here is charge with having at least induced a hearer of not only those things but the whole speech to fail or refuse to register. The witness does not admit the correctness of the transcript of his speech as you have produced it and proved it, and, being one continuous act and speech, and the effect of it as a whole being involved in the charge, I think it would be manifest error if I should refuse the witness the right to undertake to tell what he said on that occasion. I therefore overrule your objection.

**Ruthenberg (Continuing):** This young man, who had done what was called a heroic deed, was returning from the trenches to his home city on a furlough.

**The Court:** Of course, you will understand that you are not expected to make a new or different speech, but to repeat, as exactly as you can, the language you used on that occasion. You understand that?

**Ruthenberg:** I am making, as I recollect, the speech I made on May 27th [1917].

**Q:** I will ask you, Mr. Ruthenberg, also if this is a speech made for one occasion, or whether it is a speech that has been used—

**The Court:** I do not think that is proper.

**Mr. Sharts:** Just to show his familiarity with what he has been discussing, his statements.

**The Court:** it might have been some other effect than that, if that was true, and that is a matter for cross examination.

**Ruthenberg (Continuing):** This young man, returning to his home from the trenches, after having done what was called by the newspapers a heroic deed, namely, having killed in a struggle, single-handed, 3 of his enemies, was to be welcomed at home by a crowd at the depot, by music and by all of the other things that go to make up the sham patriotism of murder and warfare. And the people waited for him at the station. The train came in and they looked for him to welcome him with glad acclaim. But he was not to be found. He did not come from this train. He was not seen to leave it. And the audience, the people that assembled there, did not find him to welcome him as they expected. But he had himself left the train at a station on the outskirts and by the back alleys reached his home, where he found his mother — his mother to whom he went first, and she, too, was about to honor him, about to state her gladness for his heroic deeds, state how much she admired his courage, and when she started to do that the young man laid his head down on her lap and put his face on his hands and began to weep and said, “Mother, I cannot think of it. I cannot think of this horrible thing I have done. I cannot think of the look of that young man’s face — a young man just as I, a young man who might have been my comrade and friend, a young man who might have been a happiness and joy to me — when I put that bayonet in him and took his life from him. Do not talk to me about the glory of this deed. Do not talk to me about the bravery of the deed. It will be the curse of my life for the rest of my days that I murdered a fellow human being thus.” That is what conscription means to the youth of this nation. That is what it means to them to be taken from their homes without their consent and sent out to the trenches to murder and be murdered for the profits of the ruling class of this country. That is what the government of this nation has done in putting this statute on the law books of this country — a statute which, in my opinion, is entirely contrary to the fundamental law of this country, the constitution of the United States.

If law means anything, if words mean anything, when the constitution says that there shall be no involuntary servitude in this nation except as a punishment for crime, it forbids specifically taking a man against his will and making him fight and murder his fellow human beings. Yes, one of the foremost states-

men in the history of this country, Daniel Webster, as long ago as 1814, when the Congress of the United States was considering the passage of a conscription law, arose in the House of Representatives of this land and denounced it as contrary to the constitution of the country, saying, "Where is it written in the constitution, in what article or section is it contained, that you may take children from their parents...compel them to fight the battles of any war in which the follies or the wickedness of the government may engage? Under what concealment has this power lain hidden which now for the first time comes forth, with a tremendous and baleful aspect, to trample down and destroy the dearest right of personal liberty?"

And thus I say to you, who are gathered here, those of you who believe in humanity, who believe in brotherhood, who believe in the beautiful and good things of life rather than in bloodshed and murder, that we must use our strength and our power to wipe out of existence, to put out of office, this government which, contrary to the wishes of the people of this country, has put this law on the statute books. And I say to you further — I say to you here, now, believing, as I do, that war is a horrible thing; believing with all my heart and soul that to go forth in war is to murder your fellow human beings; believing, as I do, that this war is a war in the interests of the ruling class only; believing, as I do, that this war has come into existence because the class in power and in control of the government of this country desires to continue to make profits out of the murder of human beings, and to protect those profits which they have invested in loans to one side in this war — I say to you, as I have said before from the rostrum on this public square, that I refuse to become the victim of the ruling class. I said to you before I knew that the ages specified in this law would not include me — I said to you then that I would refuse to be conscripted, that I would refuse to shoot my fellow human beings, and I say to you now that there is no power on the face of the earth that could make me shoulder a gun and go forth in the world to murder another fellow human being of mine. There is no power in the government of this country that can say to me, with the conscientious objections which I have to this war and to the work of the war, that I shall murder another human being, and, rather than commit that act of murder, than to be forced

into the act of murder, I will permit the government to riddle me with its bullets.

My friends and comrades, when I speak to you thus, I am speaking to you in all seriousness. I am speaking to you with that spirit which has been shown by those 10,000 men in England who are today lying in English jails because they refused to go to war, because they refused to permit a government to conscript them. I am speaking to you as Karl Liebknecht spoke in the German nation, as he spoke in the parliament of that country, when he denounced the war as a war of the ruling class and stated his unalterable opposition to that war. And I say to you that, if you are inspired with this ideal, which is the hope of the world; if you are inspired with that which will bring a better world, then you must stand up and fight for that ideal. You must fight with those who are fighting against war. You must use all of your strength and power to bring the day when we can repeal the law which thus violates the dearest right of personal liberty, which would cause a man to kill another human being — you should join and fight with the Socialist Party until the day comes that we can wipe this law off the statute books through the people rising in their might, taking control of their own affairs, and putting out of office a government which has betrayed them into this thing.

My friends, they have said of us Socialists who stand here before you that we are traitors, that we are street corner traitors. I say to you that it is not the men and women who have dedicated their lives to upholding this principle of humanity, not the men and women who desired nothing but to bring brotherhood and comradeship and fraternity into the world, not the men and women who opposed this war before the election time and who oppose it now, who are the traitors to the American people — but I say to you that it is the men who asked for their election, the men who pleaded through you to support them because they kept you out of war, and then hurled you into the war, who are the traitors, if there are any traitors to the American people in this country at the present time.

We must organize our forces to meet the situation. We must organize our power to alter this situation. There is no hope for the people, of again bringing peace and humanity and the spirit of brotherhood and the spirit of comradeship and the good and beau-

tiful things into the world and ending all this horror and misery and suffering and bloodshed, unless the people themselves organize their power and make themselves articulate. We can, by meetings of this character, by coming together here, 5,000 people this afternoon, and protesting against this conscription law — we can tell the government of this country that we do not want this law and we demand that Congress repeal this law, and if this Congress of this country will not repeal this law — if we cannot make the government understand through these mass meetings all over the country — for just as we are meeting here today, men and women are meeting in other cities, and just as we are protesting against the war, so men and women are protesting the world over — if we cannot make this government understand that the people did not want war, that they did not want conscription, then we must await the day until we can go to the election booths again and sweep that government out of power and elect men to power who will represent the wishes of the people and change this law and repeal this law, this traitorous act of the ruling class of this country, which has taken from the people of the nation the dearest rights of personal liberty, even to the extent of making them do murder.

We of the Socialist Party are carrying on this fight. We are here to carry on this fight. We are here to organize the people of this country for this struggle. We are working toward this end, that out of the chaos, out of the bloodshed, out of the horror of this war at the present time there may come a new society, a new world, a new organization of the people, which will end the cause of war by ending the private ownership of the industry which brings war into existence, which, in place of appealing to us in the shape of patriotism to do murder, will appeal to us to be friendly and comradely and brotherly toward all other nations. For, my friends, there is no hatred in the hearts of the people of this country against the people of Germany. There is no hatred in the hearts of the English workers against the people of Germany; there is no hatred in the hearts of the French people against the people of Austria, or

of the Russians against the people of Turkey. They are not trying to kill each other; they are not trying to murder each other because they hate each other. It is a delusion which the lying, prostituted press of this country has tried to put into our minds in order to trick and deceive us. The people of those countries would, if they were allowed to do their will, reach out to each other the hand of brotherhood and fraternity. It is only because the commercial interests of the ruling class are at stake that they are thrown at each other's throats to murder each other.

We are here to fight to the end, to end this condition in the world, to build up this new society, to build up a new spirit in the world, to end war, to end murder, to end suffering, to end the destruction of millions of lives and billions of wealth, and bring into existence this comradeship of the future, this brotherhood which must inspire the hearts and minds of all men, in which we will have fraternity and equality, and in which for the first time the people will be endowed with those inalienable rights of life, liberty, and happiness which the Declaration of Independence says are the fundamental rights of every human being. We ask you to stand with us. We ask you to work with us to achieve this beautiful goal of Socialism, the Brotherhood of man — for today, as never before, rings out in the world the cry of the poet of the social revolution:

“Come, shoulder to shoulder  
Ere the world grows older.  
The cause spreads over land and sea.  
Now the earth shaketh and fear awaketh,  
And joy at last for thee and me.”

You at last for me and thee — of the working class, because for the first time there will come into the world this new spirit of love, of equality, fraternity, happiness, and peace.

**The Court:** That is as you remember it?

**Ruthenberg:** That is as I remember the speech I made at that particular time.

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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