Mary Heaton Vorse

Garrison, Dee

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Throughout the winter of 1916, Vorse hardly left her house. All three children had whooping cough. Little Joel was seriously ill with pneumonia. She had an entire household to support. Again she was unable to write. She tried to create humorous stories of children and marriage. None of them sold. Her savings dwindled as rapidly as the rejections accumulated.

Once, after a long day at her desk, attempting to revise a story, Vorse stumbled downstairs, sank into a chair, and idly picked up a pair of socks to darn. The children’s nurse smiled brightly, “Oh, that’s good, Mrs. Vorse,” she said. “Don’t you feel better now that you have done some real work?”

Vorse’s only break from worry over family and finances was work with the suffrage movement. After ten months of campaign efforts by thousands of New York suffragists, the voters had refused, in November 1915, to support a state suffrage amendment. The women reorganized two days after the election at a mass meeting in Cooper Union where $100,000 was pledged toward the 1916 campaign. Vorse persuaded Vira Whitehouse, the chair of the suffrage Press and Publicity Council, that the council should disseminate materials that would engage the emotions of its readers. The publicity women planned a novel, published by Henry Holt in 1917, in which the heroine battled for suffrage against the wishes of her politician husband. The book was a collective production of fourteen authors, among them Vorse, Fannie Hurst, Dorothy Canfield, Kathleen Norris, William Allen White, and Mary Austin. All royalty fees were donated to the suffrage campaign.
In late 1915, at a meeting of the suffrage publicity committee at Vorse's New York apartment, word came that Margaret Sanger was to be tried for distributing material on birth control. If found guilty under the Comstock Law, which banned birth control information as "lewd, lascivious, filthy and indecent," Sanger could be given a sentence of forty-five years. To escape this fate, Sanger had fled to Europe in 1914 before her trial. Now she was back, determined to face the charges and to bring her case enough publicity to inspire others to take up the cause. "The issue," Sanger said, "is to raise . . . birth control out of the gutter of obscenity and into the light of human understanding."

Vorse asked those at the meeting who were interested in working on Sanger's behalf to stay and discuss what could be done. A core of women, including Heterodites Alice Duer Miller and Anne O'Hagan Shinn, formed the "women's emergency committee" to elicit support for Sanger from well-known persons with political and financial power. For her part, Vorse won a promise of help from Amos Pinchot, Paul Wilson, Frances Perkins, and Lincoln Steffens. From this beginning arose the Committee of One Hundred, a group of reformers and feminists whose aid to Sanger was crucial in obtaining support from the media at home and abroad. The successful publicity drive that Vorse and the others initiated led New York State to drop the indictment against Sanger in February 1916.³

It was late in the spring before little Joel was well enough for the family to leave New York and return to Provincetown for the summer. The fishing village was crowded that season, for the war brought to the Cape the writers, artists, and sculptors who otherwise would have preferred to be in Europe. Mabel Dodge was there, and John Reed, accompanied by his new love, Louise Bryant. Floyd Dell, Ida Rauh, Max Eastman, and the poet Harry Kemp also arrived early. "It was a great summer," according to Susan Glaspell. "We swam from the wharf as well as rehearsed there; we would lie on the beach and talk about plays—everyone writing, or acting, or producing. Life was all of a piece, work not separated from play, and we did together what none of us could have done alone."⁴

After the dismal winter in New York, Vorse returned to open her house filled with memories. Joe O'Brien's presence lingered everywhere—a few clothes, his books, the carefully constructed rooms and stairs and garden plots. She felt resentful and lonely. "I had an intense reaction of willfulness," she wrote. "I did not care what I did and I wanted to believe that what I did was harmless." She began to drink more than ever and to spend a great deal of time reveling with the younger Village crowd and the camp followers of art that flocked to Provincetown that summer.
She indulged in a round of music, dance, and talk, all suffused through the dulling haze of too much alcohol and too little sleep. Such diversion also helped to avoid the knowledge that she was not writing and that her bank account was dangerously low. She took lovers, often, and with little thought. After O'Brien's death, "I was only ten months without a man," she remembered.5

In June, Vorse joined Neith Boyce and Susan Glaspell and the others to plan the new season of plays. John Reed matched Jig Cook in his ardor to bring about renaissance of the theater. Together they pulled the Cape colony along with them to prepare the playhouse on Vorse's wharf. As the opening of the second bill of the Wharf Theater drew near, the group began to worry that it had no more plays to offer. Glaspell met the old anarchist Terry Carlin on Commercial Street and asked him if he had any plays to read them. He had none, but remarked that a morose young man who had just arrived from New York had a whole trunk full of plays. The name of Carlin's roommate was, of course, Eugene O'Neill, and the rest is theater history. At nine that evening, O'Neill showed up on Glaspell's front porch with the script of Bound East for Cardiff. Those listening to the reading sat transfixed. Vorse recalled: "No one of us who heard that play reading will ever forget it, nor the reading of Trifles by Susan Glaspell, which took place at my house. Listening to the plays and giving them the instant recognition they deserved was a company of young people whom destiny had touched."6 When that first reading of Bound East was over, Jig Cook sprang to his feet. "Now we know what we are for!" he roared. Bound East went at once into rehearsal. Carlin and O'Neill moved from Truro to Provincetown, opposite Reed's cottage, to be near the center of excitement. On July 1, Hapgood wrote to Mabel Dodge: "The play fever is on. Jig and Susan, Neith and Mary [Heaton Vorse] O'Brien, Reed, [Frederick] Burt, and O'Neill are the enthusiastic inner circle."7

In early July, a somber letter from IWW leader Bill Haywood curtailed Vorse's Provincetown romp. Would she come at once, he asked, to report the Mesabi Range strike then occurring in Minnesota? Haywood had learned at Lawrence how essential publicity of strike conditions could be to the success of workers, especially for the raising of strike funds.

But it was not until Vorse received a letter from Elizabeth Curley Flynn, written just a week before the first Bound East performance, that she decided to leave the children for the first time since O'Brien's death and to travel to the range. Flynn wrote:

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So far we seem to have failed to get any worth-while publicity. Carlo [Tresca], Joe Schmidt and nine others, are in jail here in Duluth since July 3rd, charged with first degree murder. It is terribly serious. . . . Mary dear, there never was a time when we needed our writer friends to get busy, more than right now, if . . . our best men are to be saved from the penitentiary. . . . Carlo and the boys . . . are charged with murder, on the theory that their speeches incited to violence. It is like the Ettor-Giovannitti case [at Lawrence] except that in this state, accessories are . . . liable to life imprisonment. . . . Of course relief is becoming a pressing problem, and we hope the East will realize this and help financially.5

The letter was made more poignant by Vorse’s knowledge that Flynn was in love with Carlo Tresca. Flynn and Tresca had been special friends of O’Brien’s. They had visited Vorse and O’Brien on the Cape and had sent worried inquiries about O’Brien’s health during his illness. It was Vorse’s concern for her friends that drove her to the Mesabi as much as any desire to resume the role of an active reporter. She also sensed that days of casual sex, steady play, and too much drinking were corroding her life, as well as her work. Later, when addiction became a serious problem for her, she remembered that the trip to the Mesabi provided a temporary rescue from the corrosive palliatives of drink and drugs.6

Leaving the children in the care of their grandmother Vorse, she left Provincetown in early August. En route to Minnesota via New York, she received assignments from the Outlook, Harper’s Magazine, the New York Globe, and the Masses. Marion Cothren, the Heterodite who had accompanied Vorse to The Hague in 1915 and who was now a reporter for Survey, went with her. On the way to the Mesabi, Vorse as usual carefully prepared her background research on the conditions of labor on the range.

Until 1890 the Mesabi Range, a fifty-mile strip of low hills lying some seventy miles northwest of Duluth, was an unsettled area of swamps and forests. In that year, the Merritt brothers discovered that underneath the thin layer of clay and sand lay miles of red earth composed of 60 percent soft iron ore. The Mesabi was soon a bustling frontier. By 1902, most of the mines on the range were owned by the country’s first billion-dollar company, the mighty U.S. Steel Corporation. Hopeful European immigrants came to the dusty red land of the Mesabi, enticed there by company propaganda promising them high wages and an easy life. The range held a conglomerate of peoples consistent with the most cosmopolitan cities.
in the nation. There were thirty-five identifiable large minorities on the range, with scattered numbers of ten other nationalities.

A spontaneous outburst of fury over lowered wages brought the walkout at St. James Mine in Aurora, Minnesota, on June 3, 1916. Four hundred men, with no labor organization to back them, voted to strike. A procession of miners, accompanied by their wives rolling baby carriages, walked the seventy-five miles of mountain roads along the range, urging others to join them. By the end of June, two-thirds of the range miners—ten thousand out of fifteen thousand men—were out. The Mesabi strike then spread to the Vermillion Range to the south, bringing out thousands more.\(^{10}\)

A procession of several thousand strikers and their families was now in movement over the range. Private guards employed by the mine owners broke up a parade in Hibbing and assaulted the marchers. On June 22 at Virginia, when the guards’ attack was resisted, shooting began, and a Croatian miner was killed. No arrest was made for the murder. The funeral parade, four days later, was three thousand strong. At the grave, Carlo Tresca led the mourners in the taking of an oath to retaliate “an eye for an eye” if there were further attacks on the strikers. When Governor John A. Burnquist heard this, he instructed the local sheriff to go the limit in controlling the “riot.”

The mine owners hired over two thousand private police, generally thugs collected from the streets of Duluth and St. Paul, to patrol the streets of the range towns. Since war conditions restricted immigration, the employers found it difficult to import large numbers of strikebreakers. Instead, the steel companies’ private army prevented picketing, harassed strikers, and arrested workers on trumped-up charges. Often drunk and brutally aggressive, the private guards “established a veritable reign of terror,” the historian Melvyn Dubofsky noted.\(^{11}\)

The miners called on the IWW for help. The Wobblies sent the largest number of their top talent ever assigned to one strike. A central strike committee was organized into language groups on the model of Lawrence, and a financial and publicity organization was established.

In early July the mine owners’ gunmen grew bolder. They entered the home of a striker on the pretense of investigating an illegal still. In the general melee that followed, a deputy mine guard was killed, as was an unlucky bystander on the street outside the miner’s house. All the miners in the house were arrested, along with a miner’s wife who carried her seven-month-old baby to jail with her. That night, miles away in the town of Virginia, the chief IWW organizers, including Carlo Tresca, were

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arrested and sent to Duluth, charged with murder as “accessories.” To deplete local strike leadership further, federal officials began deportation proceedings on the range.

The miners replaced their jailed leaders with new men, but these too were swiftly arrested and shipped to Duluth, usually on charges of violating local ordinances against holding parades or demonstrations. Homes of strikers were entered without warrants; the occupants were hurried to jail and given sentences for picketing. Attorneys scurried from one range town to another in an attempt to free the jailed miners. Within a few weeks some of the IWW leaders were released, but leadership had been weakened at a critical time.

Giving up the fight as hopeless, many strikers left to find work in the harvest fields. For a few weeks, their wives and children took over the job of picketing. At first the deputies held back from attacking the families of the miners. By early August they were beating women and children to the ground. The Duluth Tribune accused the strikers’ wives of risking their children’s lives by taking them onto a picket line.

It was at this juncture that Vorse and Marion Cothren arrived in Duluth. Vorse, at age forty-two, had never before ventured into the center of her own land. This was not uncommon at the time for those of Vorse’s class and New England background, whose attention tended to center on the cultural and intellectual life of Europe and New York City. Vorse was stunned by the vast provisions of coal, lumber, grain, and ore that lay near Lake Superior. A city child of the Northeast, she was accustomed to thinking of coal and ore in buckets, while here it lay piled by the acre, sprawling past unobstructed horizons.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn met Vorse’s train in Virginia. Flynn had been on the range several weeks, sleeping in crowded workers’ homes and boarding houses. As the dreaded outside agitator, “the most feared woman in the whole of the corporation world,” according to the Duluth Labor World, Flynn was not welcome at local hotels. Vorse sneaked Flynn into her hotel room, where for a while she could have quiet, space, and regular baths. The two enjoyed an interlude of excited chatter as they shared news of old friends and the details of their lives since last they met in New York.12

The next day, Vorse interviewed members of the strike committee. They told her of complaints from distant mining locations that strikers were refused water from wells situated on company ground. Vorse learned that workers’ houses were ransacked, without warrants, by gunmen and company guards. To verify the story, Vorse drove in a bumpy Ford, accom-
panied by a young IWW member, to a mining location thirty miles from Virginia.

She interviewed a burly Slavic woman who was chopping wood, her legs thrown far apart, behind a row of workers’ houses. This woman had scratched and kicked a company guard who had attempted to prevent her from drawing water from the well located on company property. As a result of the scuffle, the woman had suffered a miscarriage. “No cloud without a silver lining,” the woman said cheerfully to Vorse as she returned to her chopping. The pleasant little circle of intellectuals and artists at Provincetown seemed distant indeed, as Vorse contemplated this world of the Mesabi in which miscarriages were perceived as blessings and people could be denied the water they drank by the hired hoodlums of their employers.

The miners Vorse spoke to had been demoralized. The constant terror, the cutoff of local credit, the attacks by local media, the outside world’s lack of interest in their fight, the arrest of their leaders, the depletion of the strike fund—all fostered a sense of defeat. There were too few Wobbly organizers on the range to preserve hope among the widely dispersed strikers. Flynn had for a while raced from one end of the range to another in an old bakery truck, until the deputies began to recognize it and take potshots at it.

One small hope remained, Flynn told Vorse. Word had come from the nearby iron mines in Michigan that a sympathy strike might begin. Frank Little, a star IWW organizer who was to be lynched by a Montana mob in 1917, had been arrested in Michigan and then expelled from the state. Several other IWW members in Michigan had been beaten. Bill Haywood wrote Flynn that it would be best if she and Vorse tried to talk to the miners there, as the authorities might be hesitant to beat or arrest women, especially since Vorse represented several important newspapers and magazines. Vorse agreed to go. She still felt secure in her position as a noted author with influential friends among the intellectuals in the Northeast.

Flynn and Vorse first visited Carlo Tresca in jail in Duluth, where he was held for five and one-half months without bail. As Vorse and Flynn entered the Duluth train station en route to Michigan, they realized they were being followed by men who they assumed were detectives. Following the directions of Flynn, an old hand at shaking police, Vorse boarded her train, walked through and got off at the other end. They then took another train into the station nearest their destination, arriving at four in

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the morning. At the meeting of miners in Michigan they discovered that there had been no plans for a sympathy strike. Flynn presented a rousing appeal for funds. That evening they stayed with some young anarchist Italian miners who frightened Vorse by their bellicose description of how they would shoot any detective who dared to follow their women guests. Flynn was accustomed to being threatened by police; an IWW member since 1907, she had been behind bars five times. She was amused at Vorse's relief when they boarded the train to Minneapolis without incident. They were scheduled to speak in St. Paul to a middle-class women's club on the condition of women and children on the range. As a result of their appearance, Flynn secured the help of a prominent club member in releasing on nominal bail the worker's wife who had been arrested in the fracas that had led to the jailing of Carlo Tresca.

By early September Vorse realized the strike was lost. The workers did win, at enormous cost, some minor improvements in working conditions. Repression of the strike was expensive for the mine owners. With war orders rolling in and the source of cheap immigrant labor cut off by the war, the employers granted concessions. They announced a small wage increase and a minor reform of the contract system. Most of the arrested workers and organizers were released in the fall.

The publicity given to the strike by Vorse and a few others brought in a small amount of funds and helped to hasten the conclusion of a state report, which made clear that the mine guards hired by the companies were chiefly to blame for the violence. This report caused a brief protest against the tactics of the Oliver Mining Company in the state press. Even so, the open shop was maintained by the employers, and the Mesabi miners remained unorganized until the CIO drive of the 1930s.

During the weeks Vorse spent on the range, several new experiences shaped her future involvement with the labor movement. She had for the first time been an actual participant in a strike, speaking to workers from a platform, serving as a sort of co-leader with Flynn. As an identified strike leader, Vorse experienced local hostility first hand. She had not before personally faced the scowls of hotel clerks and the threats and curses of armed men. At Lawrence and in New York she had seen policemen attacking men and women. She had read how bands of brigands with guns terrorized strikers and their families in remote locations like the Mesab Range, but she had never before witnessed it. Vorse also had a new understanding of the idealistic stamina of the organizers. Unlike herself, they would not return to respectability after a few days or a few weeks in the field.
Mesabi strengthened Vorse's interest in the lives of working-class women and their children. It was the women, not the men of the range, who most piqued her curiosity. Although Vorse still felt ill at ease in a worker's home, she sensed a rapport with the wives of the miners. Their common female interests helped to close the gap that lay between her life and that of the immigrant poor. Vorse's sensitivity as a reporter was to the story that lay behind the white curtains at the shanty windows, the boiling pot of garden beans on the rusty wood stove, the mended clothes of the children. That women could remain intent on producing beauty and comfort for their families in the bleak ugliness of a mining settlement seemed to Vorse a remarkable triumph of humanity. On the Mesabi, so far removed from Amherst dining rooms and European liners, she met women whose courage and will to overcome seemed far greater than those of anyone she had ever known.

Even after her time on the Mesabi, Vorse continued to rely on an appeal to decent citizens in all parts of the country who she believed would be as outraged as herself if they only knew the real conditions of the workers or the tactics by which mine owners broke unions. Vorse no longer sought these good citizens among the economic elite of a strike area; Lawrence had taught her the futility of that pursuit. Yet she believed that in every locale there were middle-class Americans who "exemplified the whole American spirit." She remembered the farmer in Lawrence who came to read workers their rights. She admired the three mayors on the Mesabi who urged the federal mediators to come to the range. In 1916, Vorse held that all that was necessary to increase the ranks of these progressive few was to somehow break through the lies of the press and increase public knowledge of what was actually occurring in places like the Mesabi. The more difficult question—why the major media, the courts, the local and state governments, and most of the local clergymen and merchants, so generally and consistently hampered any effort to advertise the truth—was one that Vorse did not choose to analyze in 1916.

In her article about the Mesabi strike, published in the *Outlook* in August, Vorse denied that media distortion and news blackout of the range strike were due to any systematic suspension of the facts. Rather, Vorse wrote, the failure of the public to understand the Mesabi strike was "due to the lack of communication between the worker and that thinking part of the community which forms the public opinion and which asks that labor shall receive its fair hearing in the courts and in the press." Perhaps she wrote this tortured piece of logic as a clever stratagem that allowed her article to be published in the *Outlook*. Maybe the article was written to
soften the public temper. Most likely, though, she wrote it because she still believed it was true.

The difficulty of placing the facts before the public must have been apparent to her, for the Outlook published her article alongside a refutation of her words written by Tyler Dennett. Dennett, who had left the ministry for a writing career, presented the “employer’s point of view” to Outlook readers. His contempt for the sentimental idea of egalitarianism would later be manifested in his fierce opposition to the New Deal when he was president of Williams College. Perhaps the editors of the Outlook sought to be objective by printing two sides of the story. But the printed result was hardly educational: Dennett’s sketch was a mix of company-supplied falsifications and embellished statistics. The average reader must have concluded that Vorse’s carefully researched report of the Mesabi strike was open to question.13

Once again direct experience demonstrated to Vorse how effectively the power of wealth could block the workers’ fight for a union. If she still persisted in an optimistic view of the force of “decent” people’s opinions, Vorse did bring another new idea home from the Mesabi. She would never again doubt that working men and women, in order to win their rights, should forcefully resist the violence directed against them, whenever it became necessary. Vorse had also learned a new physical courage. Twenty years later, that trait would bring her a head wound as she scrambled to escape a barrage of bullets from company guards.

A few weeks after her return from the Mesabi Range, Vorse moved to Bronxville, New York. She wanted Joel to have a yard of his own and country air after his long illness. Her son Heaton, now sixteen, was sent away from home for the first time. She sent him to the boarding school in Morristown, New Jersey, that John Reed had attended. That winter Vorse hired Miss Selway, a grimly proper English nanny, to care for the younger children while she attempted to write the light fiction that had heretofore supported her family. After months of no sales, she was near panic. An inheritance of $600 from her father’s sister had carried her through the previous year. Now she was down to her last slim resources. Illness again plagued the house. Joel and Ellen were ill with croup. Heaton came down with pneumonia. Vorse had to spend time with him in Morristown while he was hospitalized. She brought him home to Bronxville and nursed him there.

Through all the strain, Vorse struggled to write, with increasing de-
spondence. For the first sustained period in her life, she could not sell her fiction. Rejection after rejection came in the mail. She began stories, then stopped, doubting their worth. Unable to finish one, she slogged on to another, devising a new plot. All her small savings were gone, with the heavy expenses of the children's nurse, medical care, and the Morristown school. Suddenly one day she dashed out a light fantasy on the Bohemians of the Village. It sold for a good price. The sale restored her self-confidence.14

But she could not forget that time of descent. Forty-three years old, with no formal training of any kind, she had a large family to support entirely through her own efforts. Vorse was convulsed as never before by her desire to escape daily responsibilities of child care and household, in order to write. Her need to retreat into isolation, and the difficulty of doing so with a house full of noisy children, coupled with her guilt at denying them close guidance and attention from the only parent they had, drove her into a state of emotional and physical exhaustion. As a single mother, Vorse was forced into the debilitating task of being prime nurturer, as well as sole breadwinner, for her three children. Several years later, Vorse recalled in tortured self-blame that during this period of her life she had sometimes walked the streets at night to delay her return home until the children had been put to sleep by their nurse. It was now that her guilt-laden quest to write and think in lone peace began to assume the proportions of an obsession.

It became more apparent that winter that the United States would soon enter the war. Vorse had suspected that America would be drawn in ever since her trip to Europe in 1915. But she had been so overwhelmed by O'Brien's death, family concerns, anxiety over finances, and the pressure of writing that the actual entry into war came as a jolt that abruptly curtailed her preoccupation with her private life.

It was her towering need for income, rather than patriotic support for Wilson's war administration, that caused her to accept, with gratitude, a job given to her by her friend Will Irwin. As chief of the foreign department of the federal government's Committee on Public Information (CPI), America's propaganda ministry during the war, Irwin hired her to write three pamphlets on the rights of small nations in eastern Europe.15

During the almost two years of war, Vorse commuted between Bronxville and her apartment in Washington, D.C. Along with her work for the CPI, she also sold a few of her income-producing lollipops to the women's magazines, as well as labor articles and reports of the activities of the War Labor Board. With Heaton in Morristown, and the younger
children with Miss Selway in New York, she rejoiced in her escape from daily child care. She discovered she could work much better away from home. In Washington, her spirits soared, as did her sex life.\textsuperscript{16}

The war years saw the acceleration of some long-sought reforms in public housing, public health, and workmen's compensation. Eight more states gave women the vote, at least on some issues, and the House of Representatives passed the suffrage amendment during the war. For the first time American trade unions were recognized by the federal government as a legitimate force in the social structure. In return for a no-strike pledge from the AFL, the government during the war agreed to support the principles of collective bargaining, equal pay for equal work for women, the eight-hour day whenever possible, and the right of all workers to a living wage. This was the greatest advance that unionism had made so far. Thus, to many left liberals, the coming of war seemed to forecast a new economic and political order.\textsuperscript{17}

Vorse's much discussed article on wartime conditions in Bridgeport, Connecticut, published in \textit{Harper's} in early 1919, reflected this hopeful illusion. She described "two Bridgeports," one a poor and squalid city shaped by "the old feudal system of industry," the other the new Bridgeport vitalized by the federal action of the War Labor Board, the Recreation Commission, and the Housing Commission. "The world is ever more and more clearly dividing itself between those who have the ideals of autocracy and privilege and those who have the ideals of democracy; between those who place the emphasis on a civilization run for profit and those who place it on a civilization run for people," she wrote. It was in places like Bridgeport, Vorse predicted, "that the complacencies of the old order are going to be ground into dust."\textsuperscript{18}

Acting on this hope in March 1918, she submitted a plan to Arthur Bullard, presumably seeing him as a conduit to George Creel, chief of the Committee on Public Information. Vorse's idea, one she had "thought out in detail," was to use the existing propaganda channels of the CPI to teach the American people "contemporary industrial history." She argued that the federal government was then in the hands of liberals—"men who perceive the coming change and who hate the wastefulness of the old ways of conducting life." Yet the public remained uneducated, unaware of the inequalities between labor and capital, prey to the lies of reactionary employers. By contrast, Vorse wrote Bullard, the liberals in Washington realized that the war could not be won without industrial peace, and that industrial peace could not be achieved without industrial justice. Vorse then believed government officials had only to publicize the facts.
The facts would speak for themselves. An informed public opinion would ensure the creation of an economic democracy. It was all so simple.

The solution was indeed relatively simple for reformers who analyzed the operation of the American economy from a classless perspective. In early 1918, Vorse thought in terms of privileged and nonprivileged categories, not in the stark orderings of European Marxism. She then held, with A Clubber Walter Weyl, that “progress will come from the efforts, not of a single class, but of the general community.” The aftermath of war would teach her wrenching lessons.

Events were to forge for Vorse a new political consciousness. During the war, it became more and more apparent to her that the American government, in response to widespread public dissent, was using the cloak of patriotism in an effort to extinguish the organized left in the United States.

The popular myth still persists that domestic opposition to the First World War was negligible after Congress, with fifty-six dissenting votes, declared war in April 1917. Yet the radical movement in the United States, as represented by the IWW and the Socialist Party, gained strength upon the declaration of war. The IWW added thirty thousand members in the five months after the United States entered the conflict. When the Socialists called for resistance to conscription and to war-fund efforts, the socialist vote rose significantly in the municipal elections of 1917. In addition, opposition to the draft was widespread, strong, and consistent among American peace groups and segments of the urban population. George Creel of the CPI summed up the problem of the war leadership when he described domestic hostility to war as a “very active irritation that borders on disloyalty.”

Two months after the United States entered the war, the Espionage Act became law. It levied a maximum penalty of ten thousand dollars and imprisonment for twenty years on anyone who interfered with the operation of the military or opposed the draft. Needing broader legislation to silence opposition and to curb radical labor, the war government passed the Sedition Act in 1918. This bill, vaguely worded, even prohibited disloyal language. It was clear that left protest of nearly every kind was now to be punished.

Draft resistance and antiwar protest were suppressed by private groups and government at all levels. Hundreds of Americans were given jail sentences for the exercise of free speech. Walter Heynacher’s case was typical. Heynacher argued with a young friend in South Dakota about enlistment and expressed his opinion that “the war was for the big boys in Wall
Street.” For this, he was sentenced to five years in prison. An Oklahoma minister who spoke against the draft act was given a twenty-year sentence. Walter Matthey of Iowa was sentenced to a year for merely attending an anticonscription meeting and applauding the speaker. An Ohio farmer said that the murder of innocent civilians by German soldiers was not worse than what American soldiers had done to the Filipinos; he was sentenced to twenty-one months in prison.

Many socialist and radical newspapers and journals were suspended by order of the Postmaster General’s office during 1917. By the end of the war the government’s withdrawal of mailing privileges had all but destroyed the radical press in the United States. Forty-five of the seventy-five newspapers repressed were socialist. The Post Office banned one Masses issue from the mails and then took away its second-class privileges on the ground that since the magazine had “skipped” a mailing, it was no longer a periodical. Some of the Masses editors, including Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, Art Young, and John Reed, were acquitted of conspiracy to obstruct enlistment and recruitment after two trials in 1918. Crystal and Max Eastman’s new magazine, the Liberator, was more cautious in its challenge to federal power.

From the beginning of U.S. participation in World War I, the IWW became a main target of government officials and business-led vigilantes. Nearly one-half the prosecutions under the Espionage and Sedition acts took place in the thirteen federal judicial districts where the IWW was most active. Deportations, arrests, and even unpunished murders of IWW organizers were common events during the war. In September 1917, the Department of Justice agents raided IWW offices in fifty cities simultaneously, most often without warrants. Papers were illegally seized, furniture and property destroyed. The federal trial and conviction of the IWW’s top leadership completed its destruction as a viable labor organization.

While the IWW trials were getting underway, Department of Justice agents arrested IWW defense committee members at many points in the country, destroyed their records, and seized their treasury. The Post Office prohibited the mailing of most defense literature or appeals for defense funds. In August 1918, 101 IWW members were convicted in Chicago and given long sentences. Vorse’s friend Bill Haywood was sentenced to twenty years and fined $20,000. At least two of the Chicago defendants were not even affiliated with the Wobblies. Most of the remainder were convicted not for individual acts of lawlessness, but simply because they belonged to the IWW. Another mass trial of IWW leaders took place in Sacramento, California. By the end of the war, the once-feared Wobblies had all but
passed into the realm of fable and song, a considerable memorial to the fragility of wartime civil liberties in the United States.  

By the fall of 1918, Vorse had seen many of her most admired friends suffer arrest, trial, or jail. Again, direct experience, not abstract theory, determined her political stance. She had read too many press attacks on the IWW and too few denunciations of the employers who sent professional gunmen against union organizers. Shortly before the Armistice, her faith in prewar and prowar liberalism disappeared. It seemed to her now that if one were rich enough, one could break many written laws in the United States with impunity. But “there is an unwritten law that you break at your peril,” she wrote later. “It is: Do not attack the profit system. . . . When a new idea assaults the power of established authority, authority always screams out that morality has been affronted. . . . It is because the I.W.W. believed that the workers should control industry that wartime hysteria was used to put the leaders in jail for twenty years.”

Such heresy as this quickened the surveillance of Vorse by the Bureau of Investigation, later to become the FBI. The tireless red hunters would monitor Vorse’s activities for at least another thirty-six years.

During 1918, Vorse was three times telegraphed by the Red Cross to do publicity work in Europe. McCall’s and Harper’s also gave her overseas assignments. She decided to leave the two younger children with Miss Selway for three months. She welcomed the chance to report the war in Europe and to enjoy a break from family responsibilities, with the increased time for writing that solitude allowed. Vorse sailed from New York on the day after the Armistice. Unknown to her, her lonely and distraught seventeen-year-old son, Heaton, unexpectedly released from the Morristown school for a post-Armistice holiday, searched for her all day on the waterfront in an attempt to bid her goodbye.

She sailed on the last convoyed trip to Europe. It was a curious trip made under conditions of wartime secrecy, blackout, and camouflage, as though a submarine that had not yet received its orders might pop out of the sea at any moment. It was a memorable voyage, her passage enlivened by several hearty encounters with a red-haired army officer.

Down the Road Again