

We Do Not Choose Death

AN EDITORIAL

FOR a century and a half this nation prided itself on the fact that the hobnailed boot was an Old World phenomenon. Ours was a different world, a New World, created by many peoples who had fled here in rebellion against the civilization of the drill sergeant. And now, by the time these words reach print, our tradition may have been reversed; the treachery of legislators who balked the people's will may have prevailed. The Burke-Wadsworth compulsory conscription bill may have been jammed through in shameful haste into law. We say shameful haste advisedly, for the anger of the American people is surging rapidly and menacingly. And the President, fully cognizant of the people's spirit, demanded the peacetime draft be passed within two weeks. To straitjacket the people into the provisions of the draft law was his aim, and the administration spared no device to secure its goals.

As we have already said, we do not know as we write this whether the bill will be law by the time this issue of NEW MASSES reaches your hands. It may. If not, it is because the legislators in the House finally felt the weight of popular pressure and gave way to it, since every one of the representatives comes up for reelection in November. The people, unerring in their instinct for democracy, know that this bill and its various demagogic amendments stand for militant anti-democracy. The minority group in the House Military Affairs Committee (surprisingly large for this generally brass-hat-controlled group), admitted that the bill "would lead ultimately to the destruction of the American form of government in a totalitarian military economy." That's how the men of the CIO, the AFL, the Railway Brotherhoods, the innumerable church and youth groupings feel about it. That's how the Emergency Peace Mobilization that met in Chicago over Labor Day weekend felt about it.

NEW MASSES has said that from the inception of the debate over the measure. We have taken issue with our contemporaries of the *New Republic*, who only yesterday claimed hearty opposition to militarism, to war, to fascism, foreign or native. But our liberal colleagues are, alas, not noted for standing the gaff. They have a 1917 tradition of capitulation when the brass hats bark their commands. In the relative stability of the 1920's that publication again opposed militarism and war. But now, like the unfortunate girl in the old English song, "once again she lost her name." For in their issue of September 2 the *New Republic* editors write, "It is with heavy heart that the editors . . . endorse the principle of compulsory service at this time. . . ." And then, with not so heavy a heart, they revile those who refuse to desert their principles, singling out the Communists in particular.

We, like so many millions who oppose the Burke-Wadsworth bill, cede to no one in our eagerness to defend our country. But we do not believe peacetime compulsory conscription is the way. We believe the absolute spread of democracy is the best means of defending our country. We hold sacred the lessons of republican Spain and of anti-imperialist China: We stand for a people's defense of the country, and we stand by every measure the people find necessary. If a people's government deemed conscription necessary, we should be the staunchest adherents of it. But we know that the Burke-Wadsworth bill is not a measure by and for the people. We know the group of bankers who fathered it. We believe, as Labor's Non-Partisan League stated the other day, "the facts are, of course, that the defense program as now apparently

taking shape will not only destroy our civil liberties but will fail to make any great dent on unemployment and the twin problems of distribution of purchasing power and increased production of wealth. You cannot eat armaments, as the German workers long ago found out."

We agree with John L. Lewis' Labor Day warning that "peacetime conscription has become one of the major planks in the platform of reaction." With him we feel that national defense is "more than building great armories of airplanes, tanks, and guns." It means, as Mr. Lewis said, "the creation of a nation of strong, healthy, and happy people, dedicated to the belief that the democratic way is the best way of living."

We oppose the Burke-Wadsworth bill because we know it is a powerful, destructive weapon in the hands of anti-democratic groupings in America. We know it will prove no more a measure of defense than did universal military training in France while the representatives of the Two Hundred Families were in the saddle. We know the Burke-Wadsworth bill is a device of fascism. We abhor it and we abhor the phony amendments tacked on to it, such as the Overton-Russell measure, supposed to "conscript property." For the Overton-Russell amendment is in effect a device to shunt popular attention and resentment away from the actual draft bill, while FDR and Willkie engage in shadowboxing over the fraudulent "draft wealth" measure. There is no dismay over the amendment in the seats of the mighty. The *Herald Tribune*, speaking for the lords of creation, admitted, "It does not, of course, conscript property, nor come within a thousand miles of it." One need only remember how the President exonerated the corporations which are actually sabotaging his "defense" program in order to understand the truth about the Overton-Russell amendment. The President grows more arrogant every day, as he feels himself growing nearer to Cæsarian proportions. His echo, Senator Pepper, urging that complete and sweeping powers be provided the President, said, "If that is dictatorship, make the most of it."

We can only reply to the senator, we accept your challenge. The American people will "make the most of it." They will not remain silent. They know that every man's future, every man's plans for his life, are in the scales. They will let you know by letters, by telegrams, by personal delegations, by mass meetings. An indication of this was the American Peace Mobilization, the permanent body set up by the Emergency Peace Mobilization at Chicago. The people know that unless they mobilize as soldiers for peace, they will be mobilized as soldiers for war. And they don't see why they should die for the American counterparts of France's Two Hundred Families.

POSTSCRIPT: *We stopped the presses to include comment on the following alarming development. The President personally completed a deal such as this country has never witnessed before. He handed over fifty destroyers to another nation at war and did it without consulting the people. He has arrogated to himself dictatorial powers. He has, in effect, written the first words of his declaration of war. He did not even have the political decency to consult with Congress on this epochal decision. His attorney general, Robert Jackson, supplied the "legal approval" for the transaction. But there is a higher authority than the august attorney general: the common people, who will refuse to follow these warboats across the high seas to death.*