

Activist Lawyer With a Cause

Gerald Bernard Lefcourt

UNTIL a few years ago, the first job for many a bright, ambitious law graduate was clear: a Wall Street firm, or clerkship to a judge, or perhaps a time as an assistant district attorney. Now, some young lawyers are choosing not the safe, traditional route within the profession but a precarious position at its flank: defending radical causes and advancing radical solutions. In the forefront of those who have chosen the second course is Gerald Bernard Lefcourt, a 27-year-old lawyer whose clients include Abbie Hoffman, Mark Rudd and two of the defendants in the Black Panther conspiracy here.

Although he has been out of law school only three years, Mr. Lefcourt's short, athletic figure has become a familiar one at the trials that have often been proving grounds for radical politics—the Buffalo 9, the Chicago 7, the Black Panther 21.

At a break in the pretrial hearings here yesterday, Mr. Lefcourt talked about the sentencing on Sunday in Chicago of two of his colleagues—William M. Kunstler and Leonard I. Weinglass—for contempt of court.

"We all consider it an act of judicial oppression which is unnecessary and which tends to force all lawyers away from these type of cases," Mr. Lefcourt said of the prison terms. "It runs counter to everything the United States legal profession has ever stood for."

But, he added, "We cannot

be intimidated, and we will not be intimidated."

Mr. Lefcourt, who was associated for a time with Mr. Kunstler and Mr. Weinglass in Chicago, was asked if he expected to be cited for contempt in the trial here.

"I think it's a possibility," he replied. "I feel the threat of it, but I refuse to succumb to the pressure of it. There's something more important at stake—the rights of people under attack."

When asked about his life, Mr. Lefcourt replies: "I always an activist."

He was born on June 1, 1942. His father is an optometrist, and his mother's family owns the Diplomat Hotel off Times Square. At Columbia Grammar School he was a guard on the basketball team and, he recalls, on his best night scored 36 points—13 for 13 from the floor and 10 for 10 from the foul line.

He was graduated from New York University in 1964 and from Brooklyn Law School in 1967. His activist career began in earnest in law school, where he and his sister-in-law Carol founded a research council to work on civil rights cases in the South.

After a time in graduate school and private practice, Mr. Lefcourt joined the Legal Aid Society in January, 1968, to defend indigent clients.

"I felt like a hangman," he recalls. "I remember seeing people with their hands on the bars screaming for a lawyer. Equal protection for poor people in this city is a farce."

He was dismissed from the society in July, 1968, after he formed an association of Legal Aid lawyers to protest

conditions in their work. That spring and summer he also acquired the clients who have taken most of his time since—Mark Rudd, Abbie Hoffman and the Black Panthers.

Mr. Lefcourt and five associates have a firm at 37 Union Square West that they call the Law Commune. Panther posters and radical slogans are on the walls instead of diplomas. The members pool all their fees and draw salaries according to need. Some secretaries in the firm, Mr. Lefcourt says, make more than the lawyers.

He lives in a one-room bachelor apartment on East 64th Street and drives a five-year-old Mercedes-Benz. His room is strewn with briefs, posters and buttons with slogans as, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." There is also a carefully kept scrapbook for hundreds of clippings in which he is mentioned.

Mr. Lefcourt's views are similar to those of his clients. "There is a need for immediate radical massive change in this country which would provide a fairer sharing of wealth and relief for oppressed people," he says. "Whether it comes about within our system or outside, it doesn't matter."

He has faith that an increasing flow of radical students will force great changes in the legal system and in other professions, such as medicine and journalism.

"Youth—that's what it's all about," he says. "In three or four years we're going to turn the legal system upside down."