

McNamara, Ignoring Self, Wants Fight Carried on

By ANNA DAMON

I walked through the gates of Folsom Prison, at Represa, California, and saw J. B. McNamara. It was the first time in nine months that the oldest political prisoner in the world had been permitted a visitor. It was just a few days before the convention of the American Federation of Labor passed a resolution, after 25 years of waiting, on J. B.'s behalf.

I saw J. B. through triple bars. Two tiny-meshed steel screens, with solid bars between them, separated us. But through those bars there came to me perhaps the greatest inspiration that I have ever experienced. I had expected to come away from this visit with a man entombed for a quarter of a century, depressed. I came away with a feeling of joy and happiness. His spirit and determination, unbroken by imprisonment, was something that no bars, no prison walls, could restrain.

Anxious to get latest information

I had to be well-informed to satisfy the questions that J. B. asked. I could not get him to answer the personal questions I wanted to put to him about his health (he has a very weak heart) or his work. He merely waved his hand and said:

"Oh never mind. Let's not waste our time talking about myself. I'm all right. I can stand things—but tell me about the other political prisoners. Tell me about Tom Mooney. You saw him recently, didn't you? Tell me about Angelo Herndon. How is his case going on? What is happening to the Sacramento criminal syndicalism prisoners at San Quentin. I spent many memorable hours with them there before I was moved into this other grave. What is happening to the Farmer-Labor Party? And what about Spain? How I wish that I was able to give all that I have to the cause of Spain!"

But he is able to read between lines

I truly saw a great man in Folsom prison.

He wanted to know about the international movement, the development of the People's Front. His information was limited to the New York Times, which the International Labor Defense subscribes to for him. He is not permitted to receive other papers. He winked and smiled—this living, shining spirit in a

This article is the result of an interview with J. B. McNamara by Anna Damon, national secretary of the International Labor Defense. It is reprinted from the Sunday Worker.

prison tomb:

"That's all right," he said. "Even though the Times doesn't say things that are written in the labor papers that are barred from here, I can read between the lines. I know that labor's on the upward march."

I want to quote as much as possible exactly what J. B. said to me. He was thinking out loud a lot of the time, but what he said inspired me so that I want to pass his words on.

He spoke of the Townsend movement. "There's a crowd of people I can't understand so well," he said. "Just think, people of 60 and older worrying about themselves and their future. Why don't they worry worry about the youth? That's the real problem.

Help for the prisoners' families

"Then there are the political prisoners who have families and children. I haven't any. But I keep thinking about those that have. Their families are deprived of what rightfully belongs to them, food and nourishment of all kinds so that the children can develop into healthy, strong fighters who will be a credit to the cause for which their fathers and mothers went to jail.

"We must do everything for them. That's your job, Anna. After all, you take myself, Mooney or Cornelison, or Herndon, and many of our old war-horses who have been steeled in the struggle—for us the hardships in jail are something that we can stand. Those of us who come out will come out better fighters, physically and mentally, to battle on and on for the cause of labor. But the children? What about them, with their fathers or mothers in jail? We must help them, not only morally, but physically. The help that the I.L.D. is giving to the children

to provide them with clothing, with food, and with the necessities of life which will help them grow into healthy human beings is the I.L.D.'s best work. We cannot, we dare not neglect the future generation."

Wanted to know about sharecroppers

He wanted to learn the facts of the conditions of the children of the sharecroppers whose fathers have been murdered, or thrown into jail for long terms. He wanted to know what schooling they were getting, how they were treated in the schools.

"No listen, Anna," he said, "I have an idea. What do you think of making a real broad appeal to the laboring people on the basis of giving a penny for every year that I have spent in jail, and a penny for every year that Tom Mooney has spent in jail; a penny for every year that Matt Schmidt has been in jail, and so forth? I think that this way you could get thousands of dollars for the children of labor's prisoners."

Finally, I refused to leave until he actually took up some personal problems of his own, and he admitted reluctantly that he was not very well, and felt that anything might happen to him.

"Other matters are more important"

"That was something I wanted to talk about," he said, "but these things seem so much more important. In case I should die, it is my wish that the International Labor Defense handle all matters from start to finish, and I am communicating this request to my brother, A. R. McNamara, and to my sister, Alice McNamara Knabe. I know that the I.L.D. will give me the kind of a funeral that I desire, and in line with the kind of life that I have led in the labor movement.

"But Anna," he said. "That isn't the point. That isn't so important. How about the children? I have been buried for twenty-five years this December. The thing to think about is the youth, the kids. In this Christmas campaign, you're asking for money to feed and house them and send them to school. How about toys? Are you sending the little ones toys?"

"Yes, we're asking for toys, too," I said.

"That good, Anna. Everything the children need and want, they should have."