



Juan Ochoa (extreme left) one of the three Gallup miners, in the yard at Santa Fe Penitentiary

THEY'RE INSIDE FOR US

Unity—solidarity—courage. These words will take on new meaning after you read this account of a series of personal visits with some of America's outstanding political prisoners.

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When after several years of knowing them "from what you read in the papers," or even personal correspondence, you come face to face with America's political prisoners, you experience something that is difficult to translate into words. And I want to convey to the readers of the *Labor Defender* some of this feeling, because I know the prisoners whom I saw expect it of me. Though they spoke to me, it

was not to me personally, it was to the world outside they had been forced to leave behind them. As J. B. McNamara put it at the end of our one hour and forty minutes interview, "I wish, Anna, that I could shake your hand because through it I would feel the pulse of the whole labor movement on the outside. I would be able to *touch* it."

First, about the visit with the women in

Tehachapi. It takes hours to reach the place from Los Angeles, driving 145 miles, through arid, unfruitful almost desert land. We had to start out at 6 o'clock in the morning to be there in time for the visiting hour. Our group included Leo Gallagher, our fighting chief counsel on the West Coast, Rose Chernin, Los Angeles organizer for the I.L.D., Sarah Victor, a veteran I.L.D.er, and Gifford Cochran, secretary of the N.C.D.P.P., who went to Germany to help free Simpson. When we arrived at California's pride—the model prison for women, high up on that windy mountain, we were shown into the matron's office, given our instructions—who could speak with whom and so on. The matron is dressed in white like a nurse. The prison faces many difficulties because of the climate and the condition of the soil, and the location.

They haven't enough or the right kind of land to grow vegetables on and because they are so far from civilization they can't get fresh fruit and vegetables and as a result the prisoners are fed an unhealthful and unbalanced diet. The California Chamber of Commerce keeps diplomatic silence on this point of course. Imagine living without fresh fruit or vegetables in California which is supposed to supply them to the whole nation.

Finally the three women were brought in—Caroline Decker, Louise Todd and Nora Conklin. I spoke to Caroline Decker. My first impression of her reminded me forcefully that Hollywood was so close by, and that this unusually beautiful girl could certainly compete with most of its products. She is small and slight, but so full of life, vivacity, sparkle. It was impossible to think of her as a prisoner—such energy couldn't be penned up. She wouldn't talk about herself, except to say that she worked outdoors which enabled her to improve her health as well as her mind for the time when she was returned to the active ranks of the labor movement. Caroline was particularly interested in the Herndon case. She knows every detail of the case, every aspect and she started a very animated discussion about its influence on the criminal syndicalism law of California under which she and the remaining Sacramento prisoners are serving five year sentences. Alert, keen, Caroline leaves you with a feeling of such confidence in



Caroline Decker, one of the Sacramento girls.

the ability of the American girl. It was hard to part with them all, hard to leave them in the sterile sanitary atmosphere of a "model" prison, but there was no feeling of sadness. They inspire much more of admiration, than any feelings of sympathy.

Moving northward we come to San Francisco. Here I saw Tom Mooney who is still in the Frisco County Jail. I was able to visit him four times during my stay. Readers of the *Labor Defender* don't need any detailed description of Tom Mooney. When he first came to greet me, it was like one old friend

Four of the Sacramento Boys—(left to right) Jack Crane, Albert Hougardy (freed on parole) Pat Chambers and Martin Wilson



welcoming another. Friendliness, cheerfulness radiate from this veteran labor prisoner. He had tears in his eyes when he shook my hand the first time. By the time we parted we really felt like old friends. Our conversations covered the globe, but he was especially interested and keenly alive to the present situation in the American trade union movement and the events in Spain. The man's poise is almost indescribable. He radiates with life and energy—so dignified, so well informed it makes it difficult to realize that he has been shut away behind prison bars for twenty years. He wanted especially to convey his warm hearted gratitude to the trade unions which participated in the twentieth anniversary Mooney-Billings meetings held in various parts of the country and for all the actions they are contemplating. "That's the sort of action we need," he said, "it's action like that that will win our freedom."

By far the most dramatic visit to prison in the entire trip was our visit to San Quentin. We went in a delegation of 16, a delegation that truly represented a united front of defense: the organizations represented were the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Anti-Criminal Syndicalism Conference which includes almost every progressive union and organization in California, the Modesto Defense Committee, the National Committee for Defense of Political Prisoners, the maritime unions and the I.L.D.

The visiting room in San Quentin has exactly sixteen places in it. Around the sides of the room runs a table which forms a square enclosure. Visitors sit on the inside and the prisoners on the outer sides. They are separated only by a wooden ledge about a foot high. There are no bars or wires. Just as our delegation entered the room, the prisoners we had come to see—the Sacramento Boys, the Modesto Boys, John J. Cornelison and Matt Schmidt, filed in too. I wish I could convey the exact feelings of that moment. There we were, from the outside. There they were from behind the bars. Everybody smiled,

everybody waved and the room was filled with such a spirit of solidarity, you could almost touch it. They walked around to take their places and we went to ours. The rules are very strict. You can only speak to the prisoner opposite you. You aren't even supposed to recognize the others. But how could I keep my eyes away from Matt Schmidt, imprisoned for 21 years but his face beaming with warmth and fellowship; from John Cornelison, Pat Chambers from all these splendid men. My "prisoner" was Martin Wilson, one of the Sacramento boys and former I.L.D. organizer in Sacramento. There was so much he had to say, so many questions he wanted to ask, so

much that he wanted to know about Mooney, Herndon, the Scottsboro case, the maritime strike, Spain. And when we compared notes all the others had the same impression. They did all the talking, they seemed to know everything that was going on. Their spirit wiped away all the walls and bars and guards, all the depressing sights we had walked through on our way to the interview. There is nothing depressing about labor's prisoners. Their attitude about their situation is entirely one of marking time.

Then on Monday, November 10, I think I shall always remember the date, I walked through the gates of Folsom to see J. B. McNamara. For an hour and forty minutes we sat talking through the gratings. Questions, question, questions, about Spain, about the Farmer Labor Party, about the People's Front in France about all the other political prisoners, the seamen's strike. His keen eyes seemed to bore through the stone walls, out over the whole world, watching what was happening, evaluating events, analyzing them. His active mind doesn't rest for a second. J. B. not only watches what is happening, he is still the energetic organizer that he was twenty-five years ago. His warmest thoughts, however, go to the children. "We dare not neglect the future generation, Anna, we must do everything for them, especially those whose fathers and mothers are in jail. That's your job, Anna, yours and the I.L.D.'s. After all take myself, Mooney, Herndon, and many of our old war horses steeled in struggle—for us the hardships in jail are something that we can stand. But the children they need our help, their mothers need our material assistance."

When I left J. B. in the grim prison at Folsom, I had a strange feeling of elation. That's what he does to you. He inspires you with his dignity, his great spirit, his steeled determination. You cannot feel depressed, even when you think of the twenty-five long years he has spent in prison. You feel proud to know him, to have seen him, to realize that the

American labor movement has produced such a splendid figure.

Space does not permit more than a passing impression of the last two prisoners I visited on my way east—Edward Denny in the Oregon State Penitentiary and Juan Ochoa, the Gallup miner in Santa Fe. Oregon State penitentiary is one of the oldest, foulest, dungeons in the United States. It makes you feel back in the middle ages. Sanitation doesn't exist. The food is horrible. The routine health breaking and gloom creeps from every corner. But Edward Denny walks through it with his head high. As he stood there talking to me, he seemed to personify the most splendid qualities of the American worker—proud, dignified, serene. No personal discomfort will ever sway men like Denny from their chosen beliefs. He enjoys the respect of every prisoner with whom he comes in contact.

Juan Ochoa was the only one of the three Gallup miners I was permitted to see. But the minute he walked into the superintendent's office where the interview took place, I could see that he understood all I wanted to say but was unable to because of the company. He knew that he represented all three of them, and that he spoke for all. Here again, the calm, the dignity of our prisoners was evi-



J. B. McNamara

dent. He was not the least bit disturbed by the presence of the officials. He said he knew there were many things we could say if we were alone, but he did want to thank all those, particularly in New Mexico, who forced the authorities to permit them to have the literature they wanted.

It is difficult to speak objectively about labor's prisoners. Those whom I visited are only the outstanding representatives of the hundreds of men and women, who face imprisonment with heads raised high. On their side of the prison walls they are keeping the banner of justice and democracy, flying bravely. We on our side, must surely be inspired by their splendid courage, to redouble our efforts until every last one of them is free and the frame-up system, the whole machinery of terror and reaction which put them where they are, abolished for all time.

Remember Labor's Neediest Cases
Labor's Prisoners and their Families