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Union of Bulgarian Anarchists in Exile

Urgent and Important

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Paris, April 1, 1958; New York, January, 1959

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He arose and pronounced these words which will someday be graven on his tombstone: "It is not I who signed agreements with the Americans, nor did I kiss the skirt of the Queen of England." This counter-accusation upset the tranquility of the proceedings, confused the judges and the prosecutor did not dare to raise his head.

He was sent to the prison of Sliven. His family awaited his approaching liberation, as did his friends, in and out of Bulgaria. Then, on March 16th, we received the following telegram:

"MANOL VASSEV DIED ON THE DAY BEFORE HIS LIBERATION AND WAS BURIED IN SLIVEN PRISON. HE WAS IN GOOD HEALTH AND HIS DEATH CAME AS A SHOCK. THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT HE WAS ASSASSINATED BY THE COMMUNISTS."

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The activity of Manol Vassev, to say nothing of his lectures at the people's university, organized around the town library, was not limited to the workers in his or other trades. He organized, together with other comrades, the National Federation of Farm Workers, which opposed the putsch of the fascists, one of whom is now in the Communist government as Minister of Electrification.

During the period of the German occupation Manol Vassev organized the resistance of the Department of Haskovo. On the day of the Liberation, at the head of an armed group, he attacked a barracks, disarmed the officers and saved the lives of many partisans who were trapped.

All these facts were well known to the people. Vassev was the object of spontaneous and general admiration. For many months his portrait was displayed in public places and hardly a single public meeting took place without his participation.

But this did not last long. On the tenth of March, 1945, he was arrested and interned for the first time in the Doupnitsa concentration camp where he remained for six months. Freed for a short time, he was again arrested and sent to the concentration camp of "Rossitsa" for 13 months.

When the Fifth Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party took place, thousands were arrested, among them Vassev. His third sentence was five years in prison. Upon leaving prison he was interned in Belene concentration camp, where he found Christo Kolev, Stefan Kotakov, Dobri Ivanov, Deltcho Vassilev, Kosta Karakostov, an old agrarian and the lawyer Yordan Kovatchev and 300 other prisoners.

Freed after the death of Stalin, Manol Vassev was again arrested on the 4th of November, 1956, during the Hungarian Revolution. On the 18th to 19th of March he was condemned to one-and-a half years in prison. This time the trial was held publicly. Manol Vassev, who never concealed his thoughts and sentiments, expressed himself openly. He heard himself accused of "high treason and espionage in the service of the Americans."

Yordan Sotirov was one of the most active militants of this generation and he was particularly active in union organization. A gifted orator, he possessed a simple and penetrating eloquence.

His speaking and organizing kept him busy on holidays, Sundays and nights. In the daytime he worked in a tobacco factory in his native city of Kustendil, where he was one of the most militant fighters for better conditions. His activity on and off the job made him among the best known figures in the Bulgarian labor movement.

In 1922, during the course of a strike which caused disorders in Kustendil, Yordan Sotirov was arrested for speaking in the Public Square and sentenced to 15 years in prison. He escaped and took the name of Manol Vassev, which belonged to a deceased refugee from Thrace. Vassev settled in Haskovo, in southern Bulgaria, where he continued to work in a tobacco factory. For 22 years he worked and carried on his militant activity, disregarding the risk of being identified by his real name and arrested.

A life of hard work and miserable pay caused strikes which ended in clashes with the authorities and jail for many workers, including Vassev. Without being identified, Vassev served time in jail, and was even drafted into the army a second time after having participated in the war under his true name.

The tobacco industry was one of the most important in Bulgaria and the capitalist exploitation was the most pitiless. It was an industry owned mostly by foreigners, who, in order to increase their profits, introduced a speed-up system known as "Tonga" (something like the Taylor System of the efficiency experts here in the USA—ed.) Manol Vassev was the first to expose the anti-working class nature of this scheme and published a pamphlet called Tonga, which became very popular. The strikes against this method of exploitation prevented the introduction of the "Tonga" and was one of the greatest victories of the Bulgarian working class under the pro-nazi regime.

Letter

To all sections of the International Workingmen's Association, to all Federations and Anarchist groups all over the World, to all militant anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists:

Dear Comrades:

We have received from inside Bulgaria the terrible news of the death of Manol Vassev in the prison of Sliven. In transmitting this news to you we again call your attention to the desperate situation of our comrades in Bulgaria and the necessity and urgency for solidarity and action in this emergency.

The prolonged repressions have crushed almost all open resistance to the Stalinist dictatorship. All the leaders of the opposition parties have confessed their "sins" and publicly endorsed the regime. Some of them who endured tortures are now respectable and were chosen as deputies in the last elections. Nevertheless the greater part of them remain inwardly hostile to the dictatorship.

Many of our comrades refused to make humiliating declarations, like the politicians, but they have ceased all activity and manifestations against the regime. There remain however, a limited number of militants who do not and cannot concede defeat. Among them was our valiant and now departed comrade, Manol Vassev.

This open resistance by popular militants is of the greatest importance to us and to the Bulgarian people because it makes the Stalinist murderers extremely nervous. There is no doubt that the death of Vassev was in reality murder. His physical and moral resistance was tremendous, and his liberation after his imprisonment in Haskovo signified a victory over the regime, a profound joy, not only for our friends, but for all the workers, who expressed their friendship and admiration for his acts. It was a disastrous loss of prestige for the Communist Party.

We are certain that our comrades interned in the concentration camp of Belene will also meet the same fate as Vassev.

The Stalinists are prepared to liquidate the last remnants of the courageous and open resistance of the working class. We are faced with a terrible purge, comparable to what took place in Russia in 1936-37, when the last well-known comrades were forever silenced.

It is then incumbent on everyone, all over the world, to make a final, determined effort to save these comrades who are in grave danger. We are asking for more than material aid, which is insufficient. We ask for a campaign of protest which will be great enough to stay the hand of the executioners.

We leave to your choice the means and methods of protest and await your suggestions. In our opinion this campaign should include the following:

1. Letters of protest sent to Anton Yougev, President of the Council of Ministers of the Peoples Republic of Bulgaria in Sofia, stigmatising the crime committed against an anti-fascist and militant worker, devoted to the working class and demanding an investigation to establish responsibility for the crime; demanding the immediate liberation from the concentration camps and prisons of all anarchists, syndicalists and anti-fascists, among them Christo Kolev, Stefan Kotakov, Deltcho Vassilev, Dobri Ivanov, Kosta Karakostov, Yordan Kovatchev, etc. and the abolition of all concentration camps and the halting of all persecutions and repressions of progressive and anti-fascist people; authorisation to the comrades mentioned above and all others who are considered as dangerous to the regime to leave the country.

2. Letters of sympathy addressed to the family of Manol Vassev, Bulgaria.

3. Meetings and demonstrations.

4. Articles in our press and in certain other publications giving a biographical resume of Vassev and others as well as factual and background information about the repressions in Bulgaria. (This information we will be glad to supply).

We envisage a broad campaign in cooperation with other tendencies and organizations who are concerned about the basic principles of human freedom. We will supply documentation of our charges and help in this campaign by publishing a special issue of our monthly review, Our Road, or a book.

We appeal to you not to underestimate any means of protest (such as the letter to Yougov). We assure you that the rulers of Bulgaria fear greatly these protests, the greater their number, the greater the chance that our comrades will be saved, for the rulers fear that the protests will spread beyond their control. The campaign must involve more and more organizations and individuals.

The Martyrdom of Manol Vassev

The first world war ended in catastrophe for Bulgaria. The soldiers and peasants in their majority, hungry and barefooted, remained three years in the trenches for a war which to them made no sense. They revolted, left the front and came to Sofia. King Ferdinand, who was of German extraction, was a stranger who governed over Bulgaria. He abdicated, leaving his throne to his son Boris. But the situation became increasingly revolutionary. A strike of railwaymen developed rapidly into a general strike.

In the fire of events, the Anarchist Communist Federation of Bulgaria was founded in July, 1919. At the same time unions of a libertarian orientation were born in the most important localities, beginning at Rousse on the Danube. The strike accompanied the birth of these unions, strikes that ended mostly in victory.

The Libertarian Militants and Syndicalists were mostly of the generation who took part in the war and endured all its disastrous consequences.