

We Don't Believe in Conscription
Emma Goldman

We don't believe in conscription, this meeting tonight being a living proof. This meeting was arranged with limited means. So, friends, we who have arranged the meeting are well satisfied if we can only urge the people of entire New York City and America, there would be no war in the United States — there would be no conscription in the United States — (applause) —
5 if the people are not given an opportunity to have their say. Therefore, we hope at least that a small portion of the population of New York City tonight is having its say.

Friends, what I have to tell you tonight I want to impress upon your minds with all the intensity of my being, that we have with us people who came to break up this meeting, and therefore, friends, I ask you, friends, in the name of peace, in the name of freedom, and all that is
10 dear to you, to be perfectly quiet, and when the meeting is over to leave the hall quietly, for that is a better argument than by the provocators who came here tonight to break up the meeting. Therefore, friends, I repeat once more, that after our speakers will be through, I hope you will leave the hall quietly, and, if there is the slightest trouble, we will hold the troublemakers, the provocators and the police responsible for the trouble. (applause)

Friends, I know perfectly well that tomorrow morning the daily papers will say that the German Kaiser paid for this meeting. I know that they will say that those employed in the German service have arranged this meeting. But there is all of us, friends, who have something serious at hand — those of us to whom liberty is not a mere shadow — and found to be
15 celebrated on the 4th of July, and to be celebrated with fire crackers — that we will not only speak for it, but die for it if necessary. (applause)

We are concerned in our own conscience, and we know that the meeting tonight has been arranged by working men and working women, who probably gave their last cent from their wages which the capitalistic regime is granting them.

And so, friends, we do not care what people will say about us, we only care for one thing, and that is to demonstrate tonight and to demonstrate as long as we can be able to speak, that
25 when America went into war, ostensibly for the purpose of fighting for democracy — because it is a dastardly lie — it never went into war for democracy. If it is true that America went into war in order to fight for democracy — why not begin at home? We need democracy. (applause) We need democracy even more than Germany, and I will tell you why. The German people were never brought up with the belief that they lived in democracy. The German people were nursed
30 from their mothers' breasts that they were living in liberty and that they had all the freedom they desired. Therefore, the German people are not disappointed in the Kaiser. They have a Kaiser, the kind of a Kaiser they want and are going to stand for.

We in America have been brought up, we have been told that this is a free Republic. We
35 have been told that free speech and free press and free assembly are guaranteed by the Constitution. Incidentally, friends, the only people who still believe in the Constitution are you poor fools for the other fellows (applause). We are rather disappointed. When suddenly, out of the clear sky, a few months after we have been told he kept us out of war — we are now told he drew us into war. (applause)

We, who came from Europe, came here looking to America as the promised land. I came believing that liberty was a fact. And when we today resent war and resent conscription, it is not
40 that we are foreigners and don't care, it is precisely because we love America and we are opposed to war. (applause)

45 My friends, when I say we love America, I wish you to remember that we don't love the American Wall Street, that we don't love the American Morgan, that we don't love the American Rockefeller, we don't love the American Washington, we don't love the American ammunition manufacturers, we don't love the American National Security League — for that America is Russia transferred to America. (applause).

50 We mean the America of Wendell Phillips, we mean Emerson, we mean America of great pioneers of liberty. We mean writers, and great men and women, who have fought for years to maintain the standard of effort. I, for one, am quite willing to stand up face to face with patriots every night — patriots blind to the injustice committed in this country — patriots who didn't care a hang. We are willing to stand up and to say to them: “Keep your dirty hands off America.” You have no right to tell the people to give their lives in behalf of democracy, when democracy is the laughing stock before all Europe. And therefore, friends, we stand here and we tell you that the war which is now declared by America in the last six weeks is not a war of democracy and is not a war of the urging of the people. It is not a war of economic independence. It is a war for conquest. It is a war for military power. It is a war for money. It is a war for the purpose of trampling under foot every vestige of liberty that you people have worked for, for the last forty
60 or thirty or twenty-five years and, therefore, we refuse to support such a war — (Hurray — applause).

We are told, friends, that the people want war. If it is true that the American people want war, why not give the American people a chance to say whether they want war. Friends, we were told that the American people have a chance to say whether they want war through Congress and through the Senate. Congress is in the hands of those who pull the string. It is a jumping jack.
65 (applause)

Friends, in Congress there are a few men in the Senate (mentioning some names) who wanted to keep America out of war. They have been hounded and persecuted and abused and insulted and degraded because they stood up for a principle. And so it was not true that the
70 people of America have a chance to express its views. It was impossible, because each Congressman and each Senator is taken into a private room where spiritualistic mediums are being used, and they are mesmerized and massaged until every revolutionary fibre is out of them, and then they come out and do as they're told by the administration in Washington.

The same is true about conscription. What chance have you men, to say, if you men are to
75 be conscripted. It took England eighteen months — a monarchy — to decide whether she shall have conscription. Up on the people born under a free sky — conscription has been imposed upon you. You cannot have democracy and have compulsory military training. You have become Russia. (applause)

80 Friends, I suggest that Wall Street and the military powers invite the Russian Czar to America — he belongs here, — and tell them how to deal with the revolution, with the anti-militarists — the Czar ought to know, he handled them. He used every method in his power in order to subdue all human beings. But he succeeded — I should say not. He is now sitting in his palace, that the revolution may go a little further. (applause) Americans evidently are working for the Czar. We already have the beginning of the Czar, who wants to employ all of the liberties
85 of the American people.

Now, friends, do you suppose for one minute that this Government is big enough and strong enough and powerful enough to stop men who will not engage in the war because they don't want the war, because they don't believe in the war, because they are not going to fight a

90 war for Mr. Morgan? What is the Government going to do with them? They're going to lock them up — You haven't prisons enough to lock up all the people. (applause)

We believe in violence and we will use violence. Remember, friends, that the very Government which worships at the altar of the Christian religion, that this very Government knows perfectly well, that they attempted to silence them. And so, if it is their intention to make us quiet, they may prepare the noose, they may prepare the gallows, they may build more prisons — for the spread of revolt and conscience. (applause)

How many people are going to refuse to conscript, and I say there are enough. I would count at least 50,000, and there are enough to be more, and they're not going to when only they're conscripted. They will not register. (applause)

100 I realize perfectly, that it is possible to gather up 50 and 100 and 500 people — and what are you going to do if you have 500,000 people? It will not be such an easy job, and it will compel the Government to sit up and take notice and, therefore, we are going to support, with all the means at our support with money and publicity — we are going to support all the men who will refuse to register and who will refuse to fight. (applause)

105 We want you to fill out these slips and as you go out drop them into the baskets at the door. We want to know how many men and women of conscriptive age — and they're going to take women and not soldiers. It is the same thing as if you fight in the war. Don't let them tell you that they will send you to the farm. Every stroke of what you do you are supporting the war, and the only reply that you can make against the war is that you are making men — that you are busy fighting your internal enemy, which is the capitalistic class. (applause)

110 I hope that this meeting is not going to be the first and last. As a matter of fact, we are planning something else.

Friends, listen, think of it. Not only are you going to be compelled — coerced — to wear the soldier's uniform, but on the day when you leave to be educated to the monster war, on the day when it will be decided that you shall be driven into the trenches and battlefield, on that day we are going to have a demonstration (applause), but be careful whom (applause) — you might bury yourself and not the working class (applause). We will have a demonstration of all the people who will not be conscripted and who will not register. We are going to have the largest demonstration this city has ever seen, and no power on earth will stop us.

120 I will say, in conclusion, that I, for one, am quite willing to take the consequences of every word I said and am going to say on the stand I am taking. I am not afraid of prison — I have been there often. It isn't quite so bad. I am not afraid of the authorities — I have dealt with them before — and rather, they have dealt with me, and am still living and stand here before you. I am not afraid of death. I would rather die the death of a lion than live the life of a dog. (applause)

125 For the cause of human liberty, for the cause of the working class, for the cause of men and women who live and till the soil — if I am to die for them, I could not wish a more glorious death ever in my wildest dreams. And so, patriots, and police, and gentlemen, who represent wealth and power, help yourself — you cannot stop the revolutionary spirit. It may take as long as one year or two. You cannot do it, because the spirit of revolution has a marvelous power of liberty. It can break through bars — it can go through safely. It can come out stronger and braver. If there is any man in this hall that despairs — let's look across Russia — let's look across. (applause) Als — who was tortured by the Russian soldiers, who never believed that she would see Russia and see her people alive, and yet see the wonderful thing that revolution has done. It has thrown the Czar and his clique and his ever staunch henchmen into prison. It has

135 opened Siberia and all the dungeons, and the men and women are going to be free. They are not going to be free according to American democracy. (applause)

Friends, I insist it is a good place for them in Russia. Let's go back home tomorrow. So, friends, don't be afraid. Take this marvelous meeting, take this wonderful spirit, and remember that you are not alone — that tonight, in every city, in every hamlet and in every village and
140 town, there are hearts beating that they don't want war, that they don't want conscription — that they are not going to be conscripted.

The ruling classes fight a losing game. The Wall Street men are fighting a losing game. They represented the past and we represent the future. (applause)

The future belongs to the young men, who are barely of age and barely realizing their
145 freedom. The future belongs to the young girls and young boys. They must be free from militarism. They must be free from the military yoke. If you want war, help yourself. Fight your own battle. We are not going to fight it for you. (applause)

So, friends, it is our decision tonight. We are going to fight for you, we are going to assist you and co-operate with you, and have the grandest demonstration this country has ever seen
150 against militarism and war. What's your answer? Your answer to war must be a general strike, and then the governing class will have something on its hands.

So, friends, before I close, I want to make an appeal to you. I want to make you know that this meeting sprang simultaneously from a group of people. It cost money and therefore I ask you to contribute as much as you can. I wish to say that Mother Earth is opening pledges
155 with \$50. I hope that those who can do so will do so. We want to have money, we want to have more literature, we want to have a demonstration, and we want to prove that with little money, no public support, with no militia, with no soldiers, we can support the point of real freedom and liberty and brotherhood.

Harlem River Casino, New York City
May 18, 1917)

Transcript by New York City Police Department patrolman William H. Randolph, obtained from the Immigration and Naturalization Service via FOIA. Introduced as Government's Exhibit 31 in the June-July 1917 anti-conscription trial of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. For transcript of court examination of William Randolph, see "Goldman & Berkman v. United States: Transcript of Record, 1917 Sept. 25," pp. 137-63, pp. 181-89 (Emma Goldman Papers microfilm, reel 59).