

## The criminals' strike

OF COURSE, IT WAS AGAIN THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS WHO WERE to blame. Their papers continually carried reports on the class prejudices of the judiciary. Their speakers demanded that the equality of all citizens, which was theoretically enshrined in the laws, should actually be implemented in practice! These demands went so far that when a baroness in a jewellery shop by mistake secretly tucked into her pocket one or two precious diamonds, their newspapers insisted on her conviction as a common thief, in spite of the fact that in cases like that with baronesses it was always due to kleptomania. Similarly too these organs refused to stand up for a certain enlightened count when he went bankrupt, and as a result various creditors and officials lost a few paltry millions. No, they even had the effrontery to demand that His Serene Highness should sit in the accused box, and when this failed to occur they began to incite the people against the judiciary and the courts.

And so the inevitable happened. Criminals thought that the courts were not being just to them and that they were not being properly treated, and there came about a phenomenon unique in world history, which had—as readers will see—very serious consequences for the State. One day, or rather one night, without the knowledge and permission of the police, there appeared at street corners posters announcing a general strike of all criminals! That was the last illegal act to take place. From then on there were

none. The strike was to last until the laws guaranteeing the equality of all citizens were implemented to their very last letter.

It must have been painful for the loyal citizen to see with his own eyes how from the very beginning the authorities underestimated the importance of this movement. Police and officials of the law courts went on holiday, rubbed their hands with satisfaction, and declared that they would take care to see that the requests of the strikers were met. Such glorious times as they had would never come again in their lifetime. The officials of the Public Prosecutor's Office sat the whole day in cafés and read newspapers out of sheer boredom. But then the first effects of the strike began to be apparent. The editors, those born criminals, were solid with the rest and took care not to offend against the smallest paragraph of the law. Even the Public Prosecutor himself, when he read copies of the Social Democrat publications *The People's Right*, *The Glow*, and *Stinging Nettles*, hoping in spite of everything to find something of interest to himself, was disappointed and threw them away in anger, saying, "They've become almost as boring as the *Prague Official Gazette*!"

From that moment he had been afflicted by a terrible bout of neurosis. Then quarter-day came and he had to fill in his returns. When he wrote in the column "Number of accused" "zero", in the column "Number of prosecutions" again "zero", and in the column "Number of convictions" a third "zero", he wrung his hands in despair and hanged himself.

But the neurosis spread by leaps and bounds. It was a neurosis resulting from boredom and idleness. The building of the Bohemian Provincial Criminal Court became quite derelict and its entrance was covered with cobwebs. Then suddenly there were frightful developments. All the Law Court reporters in the daily papers were given notice. And so they determined to resort to self-help. They founded the Society for Supporting the Families of Prisoners and began publicly to collect funds for it. According to its statutes the family of a prisoner would receive for the time of his imprisonment double his earnings. The readers of the column "From the Law Courts", as well as the publishers of the news-

papers, flooded the new society with contributions so that it was able to announce that it would pay to the family of a prisoner not double but ten times his earnings. But even that did not help against the solid organization of the criminals.

But the worst misfortune of all befell *National Policy*. This paper, which as is well known never published anything except reports of crimes, appeared without any text at all—nothing but advertisements. When it transpired that the circulation fell, the paper decided on a great humanitarian action and announced that if a crime took place and its perpetrator was convicted it would pay his poor innocent family the sum of a hundred thousand crowns. But even that did not help.

Finally a certain Deputy Public Prosecutor hit on an idea which in his view was bound to help in this exigency. He asked the Archbishop's Office for a list of all monseigneurs and began to institute strict searches of all their houses, in alphabetical order, and merciless inspections of all books and holdings of factories and institutes. He then sat back and waited for the result. It was quite staggering; even the monseigneurs had given up stealing!

The defending counsel in all criminal cases had nothing to do. They had no clients. But at least they safeguarded their own futures. They were aware that the newspapers would pounce like vultures on any case, and that that would be excellent advertisement for them. And so the most illustrious and expensive barristers declared that in future they would defend any client *gratis*. Younger barristers who were only just starting to try to make themselves famous even went so far as to promise in the newspapers that they would pay anyone who would engage them for his defence. But these young barristers were not rich and the reward which they offered was consequently quite small, and, as the criminals' organization remained solid, the attempt failed completely.

At Police Headquarters they were in despair. All the police chiefs sat in their offices and twiddled their thumbs and by an ordinance of the Counsellor of the Imperial and Royal Court and the Chief of Police, policemen were ordered to go out and catch butterflies so as not to lose the knack of catching. But the

Counsellor tried other ways of improving conditions. The newspapers published a report that he had held an important conference with the leaders of the German Club the very day before the German students' processions were scheduled to start. The calculation was that one or two members of the National Socialist Party would get themselves jailed, and the cause would be won. But when the processions took place, nobody took any notice of them. And so everything had failed. The police chiefs were desperate. If the truth is to be told, this despair had still another cause. Police Headquarters were prepared to hand over to the courts those policemen who had broken the law, maltreated the public with unnecessary inhumanity, or jostled people without due reason. And the Police Headquarters of that city of which we are writing here knew from experience that it was a dead certainty that even at only slightly disturbed times there would have been at least a hundred such cases. But all expectations were disappointed and the Counsellor began to have an unpleasant suspicion that his own staff belonged to the criminals' organization.

And then he had an idea to save the situation. He started to prosecute policemen for being in league with the criminals. But again he had no proof. The only complaint he had was that earlier on they had committed crimes but now did so no longer. He could not convict them on such slender grounds.

The importance of the counsellors and officials of the Criminal Court began to dwindle rapidly. It was known that they drew their pay and did nothing. When someone went into an inn and said he was a Counsellor of the Criminal Court people began to edge away and the poor man could read on all the guests' faces the thought: "Again one of those parasites who eat up our rates and do nothing in return." The officials of the Public Prosecutor's Office no longer dared show their faces in the street.

In parliament, meanwhile, an urgent bill was introduced requiring the abolition of all relevant posts and offices in view of their inability to furnish proof of any activity.

Now things were really bad; this was the straw which broke the camel's back. The government took matters in hand. All

convicts serving long terms of imprisonment received pardons and were released. They had heard nothing about the strike and there was a hope therefore that they would immediately allow themselves to be used to break the strike. But the strikers had their pickets at all the prisons and they explained at once to those who were released what it was all about and warned them against strike-breaking. The government failed totally with its action and the situation became much worse, because all authorities — officials as well as prison employees — became redundant.

For a time there was serious thought of awarding government grants to criminals. The Agrarian Party proposed that subventions should be given for committing a crime, but on mature consideration this bill was rejected.

Meanwhile the day was approaching when the bill for the Abolition of the Criminal Courts, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the police, prisons, and prison administrations was to come up before parliament. But on the day before, early in the morning, there suddenly assembled before the building of the Governor General's Office a crowd of many thousand people, as though they had been belched forth out of the earth. At its head there stood four men. There was the President of the Criminal Court, carrying a long pole at the end of which was fastened an enormous notice with the words: "Give Us Work!" Beside him, like a frowning god, walked the Public Prosecutor who carried an enormous banner: "Abolish Unemployment!" The interesting head of the Chief of Police was overshadowed by the letters of the slogan: "The Only Ennobling Thing is Work!" Finally came the President of the Chamber of Barristers, wiping his sweating brow as he trudged along under the heavy burden of the poster: "Give Us Back Our Criminals!" After these four gentlemen came a crowd of counselors of the law courts, secretaries, investigating magistrates, assistant judges, probationary lawyers, assistant prosecutors, police officials, defence counsels — in fact, members of all classes who were suffering as a result of the criminals' strike.

The above-mentioned four gentlemen put down their banners and went into the palace of the Governor General. The

policemen who had not taken part in the procession, because they found the present state of affairs quite agreeable to them, observed these peculiar demonstrations with unconcealed interest.

Then there appeared on the steps of the palace the four-member delegation. The President of the Supreme Court took hold of his pole and waved it as a sign that he wanted to inform the gathering of the result of the mission. There was a deathly silence. Then the President, with angry gestures and in a voice overcome with emotion, proclaimed, "He refused to receive us!"

"Refused to receive you! The bastard!" could be heard from the crowd, and thousands of clenched fists were raised towards the windows of the Governor General's Office. There was an uproar of shouts and oaths. Some stones flew straight at His Excellency's residence.

The police understood that if they did not intervene now it would be a crime. And because they were no longer committing any crimes, they started to intervene. Prague had never yet seen such a riot! The Public Prosecutor broke his pole and its slogan on the heads of policemen, the Chief of the Police tore the feathers off the hats of his own men just as though they had been members of the National Socialist Party. The scandal ended with the arrest of five hundred people, all of them high state officials or well-known barristers.

The next day the columns of *National Policy* were full and the law courts had their hands full of work again. The great majority of the rioters were discharged, because they had acted at a time when their minds were momentarily disturbed. Only a few less important people were sentenced to fines from five to ten crowns. But on that day the criminals' strike came to an end. They realized that they could quite easily be replaced. And the sentences passed on those who had replaced them convinced them that the equality of all citizens before the law could not be achieved. The strike had failed.

And so it happened that in the country where all this took place the equality of all citizens before the law continued to be valid only on paper.