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Hunger Striking in America

Rebecca Edelsohn and the Anarchist Response to
Social Unrest

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it for a long time” She stated that she was not sure yet the Edelson would even recover her health. Fitzgerald also explained that Edelson had neither known nor asked to be released.²⁹ After Edelson’s release, she wrote a report about her hunger strike and then mostly disappeared from the public spotlight. However, Italian anarchists, still angry at the violence of the police, set off at least three bombs in New York City, one on the anniversary of Francisco Ferrer’s execution and one on the 11th of November.

²⁹ “Free Becky Edelson Funeral Plans Off,” (August 21, 1914): 15.

which employed the strategies of the suffragettes in England, did not win her support from the mainstream feminist movement in America. July 22, 1914 representatives of the American suffrage movement announced that they would neither support Edelsohn, nor offer her their sympathy because her case was not in the hands of a man, but instead that of Catherine B. Davis, the first woman to be appointed to the high level position of Commissioner of Corrections, and considered by many to be a supporter of the women's movement.²⁶ Edelsohn maintained her hunger strike for 30 days. Commissioner Davis and others within the prison refused to allow Edelsohn visitors. Though early newspaper reports suggested that forcible feeding would be used, it appears from all accounts that Edelsohn was never force fed and only ever drank water.²⁷ On August 18, 1914 a letter from Edelsohn to Berkman was released to the press. The short terse letter stated only: "I am still sticking to my programme, having fasted over twenty-seven days. They have not yet forcibly fed me. I am very weak."²⁸

On August 20, 1914 Edelsohn was released from prison after anarchist M. Eleanor Fitzgerald, office manager of *Mother Earth*, paid the \$300 fine to keep the peace. Fitzgerald explained that she paid the bond because Edelsohn was starving to death and Commissioner Davis was not going to release her, "I believe that if we had not acted the would have let her die and said nothing about

²⁶ "Fast Hasn't Hurt Beck Edelsohn Yet," *New York Times* (August 23, 1915): 9. For contrast see *The Woman Rebel's* cynical and sarcastic portrayal of Davis in the August 1914 issue, "Becky and the Respectables": "Miss Davis is respectable. Miss Davis works for Rockefeller. He gave her her career." However socialist feminist women, including Rose Pastor Stokes, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Anna Strunsky Walling supported Edelsohn's hunger strike and protested the actions of Commissioner Davis. See "Becky Edelsohn Protest," *New York Times* (August 11, 1914): 16.

²⁷ "To Break 'Starving' of Becky Edelsohn," *New York Times* (July 21, 1914): 2 and "Free Becky Edelsohn Funeral Plans Off," *New York Times* (August 21, 1914): 15.

²⁸ "Still Fasting, Says Becky," *New York Times* (August 18, 1914): 16.

Rebecca Edelsohn (Becky) was a young woman and militant anarchist whose name became notorious in 1914 New York City. As early as 1906, at age 15 or 16, she lived in the home of Emma Goldman. She is the young girl referred to by Alexander Berkman as Alice in his *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. Emma Goldman in *Living My Life*, mentions her as one of the only people Berkman could bear to be near after his release from prison.¹ Edelsohn and Berkman became companions; it was a relationship that lasted until at least 1912 or 1913. Their relationship included a pregnancy, with an abortion performed by Ben Reitman in 1911.² By the time Edelsohn was most involved in New York City activities, and her name in headlines of the *New York Times*, she and Berkman were no longer companions.³

Edelsohn's name burst upon the pages of New York papers in 1914. She was actively involved in unemployment protests, anti-militarist protests against US intervention in the Mexican revolution, and protests against the Ludlow Massacre, including taking the protests directly to Rockefeller's country home in Tarrytown, New York. But she is best known for her uncompromising response to her early 1914 arrest. After an arrest for disturbing the peace, Edelsohn refused a bond and the promise to keep the peace, choosing jail time over a bond and gag on public speaking. Once in prison Edelsohn declared a hunger strike in further protest of her sentence and the attempt to keep her from public speaking. It was this act that catapulted Edelsohn into the public's eye and made her one of the "leading" woman anarchists in New York at the time. Edelsohn was the first person to use a hunger strike to bring politi-

¹ Alexander Berkman, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1912): 509 and Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York: Dover, 1970): 384, 400.

² Falk, Candace, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990): 97.

³ Alexander Berkman to Emma Goldman, Septeber [?], 1914. Emma Goldman Papers, Emma Goldman Papers Project, UC Berkeley.

cal attention to her plight in the United States. She borrowed directly from the actions of English suffragettes.⁴ Edelsohn herself stated, “Without sharing their aspirations, I yet admire the stand of the English suffragettes and heartily approve of their method of warfare.”⁵ Her commitment to her hunger strike brought her notoriety and support from radicals and feminist throughout the country. As Linda Gordon has noted, “the hunger strikes of British suffragists were at this time an international symbol of feminist resistance,” and American women, like radical birth control activists Margaret Sanger and her sister Ethel Byrne, adopted Edelsohn’s tactics when they were arrested and imprisoned for violating obscenity laws against distributing birth control information and advice.⁶ While Edelsohn’s actions are remarkable, she was part of something larger: a revolutionary revolt of anarchists in 1914. To understand the history of Edelsohn and her hunger strike we must look at the history of anarchist activity in New York, beginning in the winter of 1913.

⁴ See for example, E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette: The History of the Militant Women’s Suffrage Movement, 1905–1910* (New York: Sturges and Walton, 1912) and *The Suffrage Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London: Longman’s, Green & Co., 1931). For a current discussion of British suffrage tactics and their influence on the American suffrage movement, see Patricia Harrison, *Connecting Links: The British and American Woman Suffrage Movements, 1900–1914* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000). The first American woman in the suffrage movement to use a hunger strike was Lucy Burns in 1917.

⁵ Rebecca Edelsohn, “Hunger Striking In America,” *Mother Earth* (September 1914): 233.

⁶ Linda Gordon, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Right: Birth Control in America*, Rev. Ed (New York: Penguin Press, 1990): 228. Though Gordon recognizes the connection between the woman hunger strikers in Britain and the actions of Ethel Byrne, she does not mention Edelsohn’s well-publicized hunger strike two years before Byrne’s imprisonment in 1916. For more on Byrne’s arrest, imprisonment, and hunger strike see for example, Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992): 152–156.

The Long Drawn Out End

On July 11, 1914 over 5,000 people attended a mass memorial meeting called by the Anti-Militarist League for Berg, Hanson, and Caron, the three anarchists killed in the Lexington Avenue explosion. Over 800 policemen monitored the meeting, while Berkman, Abbott, Edelsohn, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Carlo Tresca, David Sullivan and Charles Plunkett all spoke for their dead comrades.²³ Edelsohn’s speech was particularly militant, refusing to shy away from the problem of violence, declaring “I want to say that it’s about time the working class came out frankly and openly and said, ‘Yes, we believe in violence. We will use violence whenever it is necessary to use it. We are not afraid of what your kept press says; when we are murdered and cannonaded, when you train you machine guns on us, we will retaliate with dynamite.’”²⁴ Later that month Berkman is quoted in the *New York Times* as believing the Lexington Avenue explosion is the most meaningful anarchist event since Haymarket. He also reports that Edelsohn had decided to refuse the bond and go on another hunger strike when her case comes up for appeal.²⁵

On the July 20, 1914, just as Berkman had predicted, Edelsohn was sentenced to either a bond of \$300 to keep the peace for ninety days or ninety days in prison. Edelsohn refused the bond and declared a hunger strike for the second time. She is sent to the workhouse at Blackwell’s Island to serve her ninety days. Berkman and Abbott, along with anarchists Charles Plunkett, Rose Yuster, and Louise Berger follow Edelsohn to the prison and then later meet at the Ferrer Center to discuss her case. Edelsohn’s hunger strike,

²³ Transcripts of all the speeches were printed in the July 1914 issue of *Mother Earth*.

²⁴ Rebecca Edeslohn, “The Lexington Explosion, Rebecca Edelsohn’s Speech,” *Mother Earth* (July 1914): 144–146.

²⁵ “‘An Anarchist Event’: Berkman Claims for His Cult Glory of July 4th Explosion,” *New York Times* (July 19, 1914): 6

a bond to keep the peace and declared she will hunger strike again if at her re-trial she receives the same sentence. Edelsohn is quoted stating, “You can rest assured that I will again go on hunger strike, and will stay on hunger strike until I die, or the courts cease to make decisions which rob us of the first and primary right upon which all our discussions of our wrongs as laboring people must be based.”²⁰

More Anti-Militarism

Following her release on bail, Edelsohn continued her work with the Anti-Militarist League. On May 10, 1914 the Anti-Militarist League held a mass meeting in Mulberry Bend. At the meeting Edelsohn repeated the threat that landed Marie Ganz in jail earlier that week, namely threatening to kill Rockefeller if he refused to mediate with the United Mine Workers in Colorado. But she, and the other speakers including Alexander Berkman and Spanish anarchist Peitro Allegra, also promoted the general strike as the best protest of the workers against events in Colorado.²¹ Edelsohn became a regular speaker and took part in the protest throughout May and June against John D. Rockefeller Jr., protests that moved from New York City to Tarrytown, and which resulted in the beatings, arrests, and imprisonments of a number of anarchists. The brutal police response to the Tarrytown protests led to a plot to bomb Rockefeller. This plot, which Edelsohn was most likely privy to, failed when the bomb exploded prematurely in a tenement on Lexington Avenue, killing three anarchists and an unaffiliated lodger.²²

²⁰ “Girl Sees Bonbons, Ends Hunger Strike,” *New York Times*, (April 27, 1914): 8 and “An IWW Heroine Although She Ate,” *New York Times* (April 28, 1914): 6.

²¹ “Leaders Abandon Free Silence Movement,” *New York Times*, (May 11, 1914): 11.

²² Avrich, *The Modern School Movement*, 183–216.

The best (and only) source for the history of American anarchism during this period is Paul Avrich’s *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States* (1980). Avrich’s book discusses the history of anarchist education, and pays particular attention to the Ferrer School in New York City. The Ferrer School, named after executed Spanish anarchist and educator, Francisco Ferrer, was established in 1910 by a number of concerned anarchists, most notably Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. The Ferrer Center became the center not only for experimental and free education of children, but also for adult education, art, literature, and radical organizing. By the winter of 1913–1914, the Ferrer Center was the epicenter for anarchist activity in the New York City.⁷

Avrich’s text devotes one detailed chapter to the events that took place in New York City in 1914, but constrained by space, he offers us only a sketch or outline of this history. Of Rebecca Edelsohn, whom he describes as a “young anarchist firebrand” there is only the briefest of descriptions and no mention of her imprisonment and hunger strikes.⁸ Historians of anarchism have largely ignored this rich moment in history, which included organizing activity on a number of fronts simultaneously, was punctuated by violence, and which ended tragically with a bomb explosion in a tenement house on Lexington Ave on the 4th of July 1914. There are some contemporary memoirs of these events which help us to construct an outline of the events and individuals involved. Most

⁷ Paul Avrich, *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): [get page number!]. See also Charles Willis Thompson, “So-Called I.W.W. Raids Really Hatched by Schoolboys, Real History, Told for First Time, of the Latest Movement Against Society – A Product, Not of the I.W.W., Nor of the Anarchists, but of the Ferrer School Where Three Pupils Originated It,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, (March 29, 1914): SM2.

⁸ Avrich, *The Modern School Movement*, 189. The chapter that discusses the events of New York City in 1914, titled “Lexington Avenue” appears on pages 183–216.

notable of these include socialist and labor journalist Mary Heaton Vorse's *A Footnote to Folly* (1935) and Marie Ganz's *Rebels: Into Anarchy and Out Again* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920), as well as Thomas Tunney, *Throttled! The Detection of German and Anarchist Bomb Plotters. As Told to Paul Merrick Hollister*. (Boston: Small, Mayard and Co., 1919). However all three of these focus more on the unemployment protests and demonstrations, the Ludlow protests, and the Lexington Avenue explosion, and none discuss Edelsohn's role or her hunger strike.

The events that took place during this time are too numerous and complex to discuss in any detail within the confines of this paper. Instead this paper attempts to describe the actions of Edelsohn, and particularly her hunger strikes. In choosing to single out Edelsohn, I hope to show her as an example of the level of militancy and commitment then common among anarchists in New York City, rather than suggest that she was an exemplary or exceptional woman. Alexander Berkman described her as "active in the Anarchist movement for a number of years. Not indeed as a 'leader,' nor even as speaker or writer, but as one of the soldiers in the ranks, whose unobtrusive devotion and out-of-the-spotlight work for the cause is the very soul of the more conspicuous activities."⁹ Her actions are illustrative of the period and events; her political philosophy, like that of her comrades took her to extreme ends, in an undoubtedly extreme time. Edelsohn's life and ideals were intimately connected with those of many of the other participants to the events then taking place. One could as easily study the actions of Frank Tannenbaum, who led armies of the unemployed into churches demanding food and shelter until he was arrested and imprisoned in early 1914, or Marie Ganz, a soapbox orator and rabble rouser, who, in response to the Ludlow massacre, marched into Rockefeller's office in early May 1914, demanding to see him

⁹ Alexander Berkman, "Becky Edelsohn: The First Political Hunger Striker in America," *Mother Earth* (August 1914): 193.

Upon hearing her sentence, Edelsohn announces a hunger strike to protest the courts "taking away agitators rights to free speech." In doing so Edelsohn became the first political hunger striker in America. As *Mother Earth* explained, the hunger strike was a common tool within prisons to protest unfair conditions, but never before had the hunger strike been used "in court as a protest against legal or judicial injustice."¹⁸ The Free Speech League, the labor defense organization the International Defense League as well as prominent liberals met at the home of Mabel Dodge Luhan the following day to discuss Edelsohn's case. According to the *New York Times*, those at the meeting decided to appeal Edelsohn's case to get her release. Leonard Abbott, Lincoln Steffens, Hutchins Hapgood, and IWW lawyer Justus Sheffield appealed directly to the police magistrate to reduce her sentence, describing Edelsohn as "a young girl filled with prophetic spirit and a fanatical adherence to her ideals and ideas ... she would surely carry out her threat to starve herself to death rather than submit to giving a bond in a matter in which she believed took away her right to free speech."¹⁹ When this tactic failed Sheffield announced that he would appeal the case to have it tried before a Judge in General Sessions.

On April 27 a false report in the *New York Times* suggested that chocolates and roast beef broke Edelsohn's hunger strike. In fact she was released on bail after Abbott and Sheffield appealed her case. Edelsohn, who had earlier that day been proclaimed a heroine and martyr at the Ferrer Center, was the guest of honor at a reception held at the *Mother Earth* office. At the reception, she and Berkman denounced the capitalist papers for their the false reports. Edelsohn stated that she was released on a bail bond for re-trial, not

¹⁸ McLane, "Anti-Militarist Activities in New York," 84. Edelsohn's hunger strike was soon mimicked by Upton Sinclair, Elizabeth Freeman and Monia Leitner after their arrest for silently protesting outside John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s office, see Threatens John D Jr., *Los Angeles Times* (May 1, 1914): 11.

¹⁹ "Fear Miss Edelson Will Die Starving," *New York Time*, (April 26, 1914): 10.

It was for the purpose of calling public attention to Colorado, as well as to stem the fever of jingoism fanned by the capitalist press, that the Anti-Militarist League was formed in New York. At the first rumor of war with Mexico, the Anarchist elements in the Conference of the Unemployed organized into the Anti-Militarist League, which immediately instituted a campaign of agitation and education in opposition to war and in favor of the Colorado miners.¹⁵

The formation of the League came two days after the Ludlow massacre, on April 22, 1914. The League's main activity and purpose was to hold daily open-air meetings and "wide distribution of appropriate literature, served to pierce the night of patriotic delirium with a few rays of violence."¹⁶ It was at one the first of these open-air meetings that Edelsohn and Harman were arrested.

Edelsohn and Hartman were arraigned the following day before the police magistrate. Police Captain Jeremiah Mahoney testifies that they spoke disrespectfully of the American flag. Edelsohn conducted her own defense in court, arguing for her right to free speech and using the court platform to advocate anti-militarism. The court sentenced her to a \$300 bond to keep the peace. Edelsohn asked if paying the bond meant she could not speak out against war. The Magistrate explained that she could speak, but must stop if ordered to by a police officer. Edelsohn refused the bond as an infringement on her right to free speech and was instead sentenced to ninety days in prison.¹⁷

¹⁵ James McLane, "Anti-Militarist Activities in New York" *Mother Earth* (May 1914): 82–83. McLane was most likely a non de plume of Alexander Berkman.

¹⁶ McLane, "Anti-Militarist Activities in New York," 83. The League also sponsored fundraisers, including the sale of "general strike" buttons and a ball and bazaar on October 24, 1914.

¹⁷ "Mod Woman Who Decries War," *New York Times* (April 24, 1914): 9, Berkman, "Becky Edelsohn," 194, McLane, "Anti-Militarist Activities in New York," 84–85. Hartman paid his bond and was released.

(and threatening to kill him), until she too was also arrested and imprisoned, or any other of the largely unknown and unnamed young anarchists who gathered at the Ferrer Center, and who were most active in carrying the outraged protests against the Ludlow Massacre directly to Rockefeller at his country estate in Tarrytown.¹⁰

The Backdrop

In the winter of 1913–1914 the country was experiencing massive unemployment, with over one quarter of a million people out of work in New York City alone. At the same time, the strike of Colorado coal miners for recognition of the United Mine Workers Union against the Rockefeller owned Colorado Coal mine had been ongoing since September 1913, and on the borderlands between Mexico and the US revolutionists were experiencing first hand the United States vested interest in the Mexican revolution, and the government's active involvement in suppressing the revolution. Member of the anarchist Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) were arrested and put in prison and their paper suppressed, and in Texas a band of PLM members traveling to Mexico were attacked and arrested. These incidents, together with the Patterson, New Jersey IWW led silk workers strike, all helped to lead to a general sense of dissatisfaction, and in some cases revolt, against the treatment of the working class in America. By February 27, 1914 Frank Tannenbaum, a young IWW member and Ferrer Center regular led his first group of unemployed people into a church demanding food and shelter. By March, Margaret Sanger had published the first issue of her new paper, *The Woman Rebel* whose masthead proclaimed, "No Gods No Masters," and called for social revolution through the liberation of women.¹¹

¹⁰ For names and sketches of some of the anarchists involved in the Tarrytown protests people and their names see Avrich, *The Modern School*, 191–208

¹¹ For details see, Avrich, *The Modern School*, H.M. Gitelman, *Legacy of the Ludlow Massacre: A Chapter in American Industrial Relations* (Philadelphia: Uni-

This was the world Edelsohn inhabited in 1914, with her time spent between living and working at the *Mother Earth* office and the Ferrer Center, where anarchists, socialist, IWW members, radicals, and intellectuals from all over the city gathered to explore new means of expression and organize groups to foster and support anarchism. In March, a “Conference of the Unemployed” was organized by Berkman at the Ferrer Center to support the work of Tannenbaum and others and find ways to help the masses of unemployed. On March 21, 1914 the Conference of the Unemployed held their first mass meeting in Union Square. Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Carlo Tresca and others spoke before those assembled marched through the city to the Ferrer Center where they were fed and offered shelter.¹² The mood of the city however, was not willing to tolerate the militant and angry demands for basic rights such as food, shelter and work. At the second meeting of the Conference of the Unemployed violence broke out between the police and the protesters. This meeting, held on April 4, also took place at Union Square, but the crowd was violently dispersed by the police. Among those beaten were IWW unemployed organizers and Ferrer Center regulars Arthur Caron and Joe O’Carroll. In fact O’Carroll was so badly beaten, that had it not been for Edelsohn throwing herself over his body to stop the police from beating him,

versity of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), John H.M. Laslett, *The United Mine Workers of America: A Model of Industrial Solidarity?* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), W. Dirk Raat, *Revoltosos: Mexico’s Rebels in the United States, 1903–1923* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1981), Colin M. MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution: The Political Trials of Ricardo Flores Magon in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor*, and Ester Katz, Cathy Moran Hajo, and Peter Engelman, eds., *Margaret Sanger and the Woman Rebel, An Electronic Edition* (Model Editions Partnership, 1997), www.nyu.edu.

¹² Avrich, *The Modern School*, 188–189 and “Anarchists Spread Alarm on 5th Avenue,” *New York Times* (March 22, 1914): 1

he most likely would have been killed.¹³ As it was it took O’Carroll over a month in the hospital to recover from his injuries.

The Ludlow Massacre and the Protests

On April 20, 1914 two companies of the Colorado National Guard, paid by the coal companies, machine-gunned and burnt a tent colony of striking miners and their families in Ludlow, Colorado. Some families had dug cellars beneath their tent platforms beforehand, and after the fighting was over two women and eleven children were found dead in one of these cellars. Trapped and unable to escape, they had all suffocated when the camp was burned. At least five miners were also killed in what became known as the Ludlow Massacre. In retaliation, miners took up arms against the mine owners in Colorado, and in the next ten days, until President Woodrow Wilson called in the National Guard, at least 50 people were killed and 9 mine properties attacked and burned.¹⁴

On April 22, as the battle raged in Colorado, and the US continued to talk about intervention in the Mexican Revolution, Edelsohn and another anarchist, Samuel Hartman were arrested at Franklin Statue, in the “Printers Row” of New York City after causing a disturbance during a soapbox protest against war in Mexico and the Ludlow massacre. The two were part of the newly organized Anti-Militarist League, formed by Edelsohn, Alexander Berkman and other anarchists at the Ferrer Center. *Mother Earth* described the League in May:

¹³ “Police Use Clubs on IWW Rioters” *New York Times* (April 5, 1914): 1 and Alexander Berkman, “Becky Edelsohn: The First Political Hunger Striker in America,” *Mother Earth* (August 1914): 194.

¹⁴ For details of the Ludlow Massacre see, Gitelman, *Legacy of the Ludlow Massacre*, 17–20 and Zeese Papanikolas, *Buried Unsung: Louis Tinkas and the Ludlow Massacre* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1991).