

No Regrets,' Mooney Tells C. W. Interviewer

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Summary: Describes a visit to Tom Mooney who was jailed in 1915 for labor organizing and who spends his days caring for infirm inmates in San Quentin prison. Mooney sees Christ as "a great Leader of the workers who set an example of laying down His life for the poor and dispossessed of this world." (DDLW #326).

"Greater love hath no man than this, that he give up his life for his friend."

Tom Mooney is starting his twenty-second year in jail. Who has not heard of him, framed for trying to organize the street car employees of San Francisco, exercising a natural right, a right emphasized by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, and in 1931 reemphasized by Pope Pius XI, since he found it so necessary to try to make his own Catholic children understand.

Freedom is as dear to us as life and Tom Mooney has given up his. I went out to see him at San Quentin the other day – Father O'Kelly, the seamen's priest driving me. Two members of the Marine Cooks' and Stewards' Union went with us. The drive was a beautiful one, out over the Golden Gate Bridge (where 23 workers lost their lives in building it), out through the hills and around the tortuous bays where seagulls shrilly proclaimed their freedom. San Quentin is a buttressed fortress on a bay, surrounded by a village of guards' houses and by flower gardens and sunlight and fresh sea breezes that Tom Mooney seldom feels.

Work of Mercy

We waited a long time to see him and we wondered whether it was petty persecution on the part of the guards. But we were unjust in our suspicions because it was Mooney himself, unwilling to leave the bedside of a dying prisoner in the hospital ward where he is orderly, that caused the delay. He started telling us about it right away.

"I've been holding a funnel from the oxygen tank over his face for about three hours," he explained. "We haven't got very modern equipment here. First one arm would get paralyzed and then the other. But I had to wait until someone could spell me." He smiled as he explained the delay.

He has a happy, serene face. He has the joy a man has who loves to serve his fellows, and who loves his fellows where he serves. And he seizes the opportunities afforded him by his work in jail, as he would seize any opportunity outside.

"It's the little things that make up the big things," he said, when I told him I was glad that he could throw himself into his work like that. "I've had to live from day to day. Right now I look forward to nothing. I expect nothing. Why should I hope for freedom from the Supreme Court? We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

We asked him if he had time to read much. "My hours are from five-thirty in the morning until nine-thirty at night sometimes," he said. "And when I'm through I fall into bed and sleep like a log. If I have a chance to get off in the afternoon, I go out in the sun, but usually there's too much to do. I've got nineteen patients, and their comfort depends on me. I can't get out of it. Meals, bedpans, temperatures, charts, and like today, the oxygen tank. There's always something. Men after an operation don't have sedatives, morphine or anything like that here. After all, their aim is not to make men comfortable. So there's lots to do.

Irony

Mooney had heard of THE CATHOLIC WORKER for a long time and occasionally he sees copies of it. "Some of your readers write to me," he said. "One of them, Miss Metcalf, in Los Angeles, sends her dividend check from the Power and Light Company, the very gang that railroaded me, to my defense committee. She must be a swell person."

We asked Mooney about his religious belief – he was born a Catholic – and he said he believed Christ to be a great Leader of the workers who set an example of laying down His life for the poor and the dispossessed of this world. "But as for organized religion – I am not for it. The great masses of workers throughout the world have protested against the injustice done me, but few churchmen. There was Father Bleakly, though," he remembered, "one of the editors of" America, "who came out in my defense. And another whose name I don't remember from St. Ignatius in Chicago who spoke of my case when he was out here in California. And Archbishop Hanna signed a petition for my release. Another defender was Msgr. John A. Ryan."

Since Mooney's imprisonment, the labor movement has been winning the right to organize all over the country, but painfully, with blood and tears. Mooney's example has lent them courage, and their efforts have given him courage to face his life of imprisonment.

Privilege to Be a Martyr

“Someone asked me once if I had any regrets, – if I mourned the fact that I have had to spend my life imprisoned. And I said to them, and I say now, that I consider it a privilege to have been permitted to give myself in this way to the cause of the working class. When I was a boy back in Chicago I worked hard and saved my money that I made as a moulder, and took a trip to Europe. I went around with a Baedeker, enjoying everything. Then when I got back, I wandered from one end of the country to the other, looking for work, finally landing out here. That experience made me convinced that only the organized efforts of the masses could better their conditions. I started organizing. I do not think if I had remained outside I could have done more to encourage unionization of the workers than I have done behind prison bars. It is an honor and a privilege to have been awarded this part to play.”

(We do not consider it necessary to review Mooney’s case which is well known to the workers. Any of our readers who wish information can write to The Tom Mooney Defense Committee, San Francisco, Calif.) (To be continued)

Dorothy Day, who is now on the Pacific Coast, promises plenty of news of the labor situation there for the December issue.