

U'Ren Defends Communist Labor Party Members

By Oregonian Collection

This March 10, 1920, photograph shows Oregon lawyer William S. U'Ren defending members of the Portland Communist Labor Party against charges of violating the state criminal syndicalism law. U'Ren, who was best known as the "father" of Oregon's voter initiative and referendum system, is shown in the middle-right, flanked by the defendants, (from left) Claud Hurst, Fred W. Fry, and Karl W. Oster. Circuit Court Judge Robert G. Morrow, shown with clerk Charles Lockwood in the background, found the men guilty. He sentenced Oster to five years in prison, Hurst to two years, and gave Fry, who was deaf, parole.

Following the lead of other western states, including Washington and Idaho, the Oregon State Legislature passed a criminal syndicalism law in 1919. The law, which targeted radical activists and labor unions, made it illegal for anyone to advocate violent political or social change, or to belong to any organization that did. In the case against Hurst, Fry, and Oster, prosecutors accused the men of possessing "inflammatory literature" related to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Soviet Union's communist party. The defendants asserted that they wanted to achieve change through majority rule, not violence.

As many as 100 Oregonians were prosecuted under the criminal syndicalism law, which was repealed in 1937 after increasing criticism by politicians, lawyers, and citizens concerned about civil liberties.

U'Ren was a reformer and populist activist who promoted more direct democracy. He was a primary force behind the state's 1902 constitutional amendment allowing voters to put initiatives and referendums onto ballots.

Further Reading: McClintock, Thomas C. "Seth Lewelling, William S. U'Ren and the Birth of the Oregon Progressive Movement." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 68, 1967:197-220.

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