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THE IWW AND THE QUESTION OF VIOLENCE

By JOSEPH R. CONLIN

*We don't want to fight anybody,
what we want is more pork chops.*
—Mesabi Range Wobbly

SALT LAKE CITY newspaper readers were startled by a remarkable headline on December 31, 1916. "Plan is Made to Poison Community with Strychnine," it read. The article which followed began in a confusing manner, with what appeared to be instructions on how to accomplish the foul deed: "Dissolve one eight-ounce bottle of strychnine sulphate in one half pint of boiling water. One or two men should prepare the poison for the entire community." Its readership by then doubtlessly intrigued, the newspaper dispelled the mystery: "This is no I.W.W. plot but part of the instructions issued by agricultural agent of Salt Lake City, Herbert J. Webb, for destroying sparrows."¹

Whether or not the readers of the item had a hearty chuckle over the prank, the allusion to the Industrial Workers of the World was not lost on them. During its heyday before and for a decade after World War I, the IWW had a most unsavory reputation for violence. In the popular eye, the IWW was a conspiracy of desperate villains who set fire to wheat fields, drove spikes into sawmill-bound logs, derailed trains, destroyed industrial machinery, and killed policemen. So there was nothing preposterous in the suggestion that plans to poison a "community" might be on the Wobbly agenda as well.

While the IWW has disintegrated, its reputation for violence has survived in American scholarly writings. John Graham Brooks' contemporary study reflected his era's hostility toward the Wobblies. While it did not harp on the subject, his book assumed that violence was a part of the IWW program.² Carlton Parker, another contemporary student of the movement, did not emphasize violence as a peculiarly Wobbly trait, but concluded that the organization was guilty of at least "a few hop kiln burnings."³

The most damning scholarly indictment was Samuel P. Orth's *Armies of Labor*, which was published in the wake of the great Red Scare and reflected the temperament of the time. Orth stated unequivocally that the IWW damaged machinery and tampered with railroad

¹ *Salt Lake Telegram*, December 31, 1916.

² John Graham Brooks, *American Syndicalism: The I.W.W.* (New York, 1913), e.g. 159.

³ Carlton Parker, *The Casual Laborer and Other Essays* (New York, 1920), 106–108. Many of the subsequent historians' references to the IWW are taken from Virgil Vogel's excellently researched but unfortunately unpublished compendium, "The Historians and the I.W.W.," Typescript, University of Chicago, June 8, 1955. I am grateful to Mr. Vogel for permitting me to examine the manuscript, which describes many historians' views of the Wobblies which I might have otherwise missed.

switches. He wrote of the bomb scare of May and June, 1919, that it "was evidently the result of centralized planning and [was] executed by members of the I.W.W., aided very considerably by foreign Bolsheviks." Orth also singled out unspecified "lumbermill explosions" in Aberdeen, South Dakota, as the work of the IWW.⁴

Subsequent historians have lacked Orth's passion but many have not materially modified his picture of a violent IWW. Harold U. Faulkner refers in passing to "violent methods." Foster Rhea Dulles states that the union "appeared to welcome violence, enjoying a

brawl for its own sake." Louis Adamic, himself generally sympathetic to the Wobblies, absolved them of the use of violence to person in all instances except during a strike at McKee's Rocks, Pennsylvania, in 1909. But Adamic does attribute the violent sabotage of property to the union. H. Wayne Morgan writes of the IWW's "increasing emphasis on violence" and the union's turn "from democratic methods and the ballot to industrial violence."⁵

According to Ralph Chaplin, a former Wobly leader who became quite conservative dur-

⁴ Samuel P. Orth, *The Armies of Labor* (New Haven, 1921), 218. Virgil Vogel comments on the latter statement that there were never any lumbermills in Aberdeen, South Dakota, for the simple reason that there were never any trees of note there. "The Historians and the I.W.W.," 23.

⁵ Harold U. Faulkner, *American Economic History* (New York, 1954), 460-461; Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History* (New York, 1955) 215; Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (New York, 1931), 175, 375; H. Wayne Morgan, *Eugene V. Debs: Socialist for President* (Syracuse, 1962), 88.



Cahn, Mill Town

The IWW's undeserved reputation for violence stems partially from confrontations such as this one between strikers and the Massachusetts militia in Lawrence in 1912.



Chaplin, Wobbly

Ralph Chaplin at the age of twenty-two, in 1909.

ing his later years, "Historians using the hysterical newspaper headlines of the day as source material have depicted [the IWW's] stormy career in colors blacker than the hinges of hell. Erudite professors, quoting one another as 'authorities,' label it as a conspiracy of alien arsonists and dynamiters, the purpose of which was to place all law-abiding citizens at the mercy of the mob."⁶

In fact, several historians have disagreed with that depiction. Paul F. Brissenden, John S. Gambs, and Eldridge F. Dowell, the authors of the best-researched early books on the IWW, generally agree that the IWW neither advocated nor practiced violence except in self-defense and that the violence popularly associated with Wobbly strikes was usually initiated by employers, police, or militia. An analyst of the historiography of the IWW concurs, writing that the Wobblies "were not opposed to violence *in principle*, especially in self-defense, but . . . for practical and strategic reasons they avoided it wherever possible." Others who appear to agree include Selig Perl-

man and Philip Taft, Mary Dutton Savage, and a large number of historians who do not treat the subject at all in connection with their descriptions of the Wobblies. In his brilliant study of government suppression of radicals, William Preston observes that "the I.W.W. suggested that force and violence would meet force and violence," but his book also marshals considerable evidence that the Wobblies did not transgress so much as they were transgressed against.⁷

These are impressive witnesses, but a quick glance at some American history textbooks or the random mention of the IWW in conversation even with historians reveals that their viewpoint has not prevailed. David Saville Muzzey, in a once-popular text, stated outright that the IWW approved "terrorism, mass strikes, sabotage (the crippling of machines), the destruction of property." Louis M. Hacker and Helene S. Zahler wrote that "if damage to machinery and property would serve their purpose," the IWW was willing to effect it.⁸

Recent textbooks for both "survey" courses and courses in twentieth-century American history generally avoid a judgment but incline in the same direction. John D. Hicks refers to the IWW's "long career of violence" and the union's "warlike methods." A. S. Link has the IWW "careening from one bloody conflict to another" and most other accounts assume that violence and sabotage were Wobbly

⁷ Paul F. Brissenden, *The I.W.W.: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York, 1919); John S. Gambs, *The Decline of the I.W.W.* (New York, 1932); Eldridge F. Dowell, *A History of Criminal Syndicalism Legislation in the United States* (Baltimore, 1939); Selig Perlman and Philip Taft in John Commons et al., *History of Labor in the United States* (New York, 1935), IV:263-265; Marion D. Savage, *Industrial Unionism in America* (New York, 1922), 154; Vogel, "The Historians and the I.W.W." 40-41; William Preston, Jr., *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933* (Cambridge, 1963), 41, *passim*.

⁸ David S. Muzzey, *A History of Our Country* (Boston, 1946), 595; Louis M. Hacker, *The United States in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1962), 80; see also Louis M. Hacker and Benjamin B. Kendrick, *The United States Since 1865* (New York, 1934), 723; Frederick L. Paxson, *Recent History of the United States* (Boston, 1929), 456; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Political and Social Growth of the American People* (New York, 1941), 345.

⁶ Ralph Chaplin, "Why I Wrote *Solidarity Forever*," in *The American West*, V:20 (January, 1968).

bywords.⁹ More important, perhaps, is the IWW's enduring symbolism outside historical writing as a movement dedicated to violent methods. Present-day revolutionary groups which call for retaliatory violence cite the IWW as a forbear; their sympathetic critics point to the IWW's ruination as the inevitable result of such tactics. The conversational mention of the Wobblies inevitably elicits anecdotes dealing with spherical black bombs or Pinkerton guards impaled on meathooks. Newspaper photographs of picketline fist-fights are captioned: "Return of the I.W.W.'s."

THIS REPUTATION is an historical distortion of the worst sort, for the fact is not merely a matter of shifted emphasis but almost the diametrical contrary. During the half-decade or so preceding World War I, when the IWW was a force to be reckoned with in American industrial relations, its central office in Chicago was dominated by the attitudes of the union's Eastern or "industrial unionist" wing. This leadership, headed by the redoubtable William D. "Big Bill" Haywood, did not envision or, in fact, head a violent organization. In fact, the Haywood IWW unequivocally rejected violence and often acted as a positive force for peace in the industrial disputes in which it took part; the IWW was *nonviolent* almost to a point of principle. Even the more loosely-organized Western wing, centering in the mining towns, lumber camps, and argicultural belts — while circumstantial evidence attributes certain depredations to individual members — was rarely violent as an organization and was censured by the central office when it hinted otherwise. And certainly the Western Wobblies were no

more prone to the use of violence than were the members of the American Federation of Labor or any other conservative labor union.

The IWW rejected violence on grounds of both theory and expediency. Thus, as early as 1907 (the union was founded in 1905), the official organ stated that while violence "is the basis of every political state in existence, [it] has no place in the foundation or superstructure of this organization."¹⁰ Wobblies visualized their union as the governing body of the coming commonwealth which was emerging as industrialism matured — "building the new society within the shell of the old" as the Wobblies phrased it. Certainly there could be no place for violence in such an organization. A Wobbly at Lawrence, Massachusetts, the scene of the IWW's greatest triumph as a union, explained that violence was "reactionary and out of date." The union's General Executive Board in 1920 was more explicit. No principle could ever be settled by force, the Board argued, and what was worse, "Such methods destroy the constructive impulse which it is the purpose of this organization to foster and develop in order that the workers may fit themselves to assume their place in the new society."¹¹

The IWW also rejected violence because the nature of the revolution they envisioned simply did not require it. To the IWW, the new society was to be accomplished not by an electoral victory nor by taking to the barricades but by a general strike which would paralyze the economy and force the employing class to hand over peacefully the means of production. Wobblies were nearly mystical when they spoke of the power of the workers who "folded their arms."

Strikes for immediate gains were also rehearsals for the eventual general strike and therefore also need not be violent. Violence was "useless," a Lawrence Wobbly said, "as we have only to quit work and the whole

⁹ John D. Hicks, *The American Nation* (Boston, 1941), 63; John M. Blum *et al.*, *The National Experience* (New York, 1963), 575; T. Harry Williams, Richard N. Current, and Frank Friedel, *A History of the United States* (New York, 1966), II: 290-292. The best "survey" text account of the Wobblies is Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager's *Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1942) which, curiously, does not spell the IWW's name correctly, calling the Wobblies, the "International Workers of the World." The best "twentieth century" text account is David S. Shannon's *United States in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 1963), 85-86.

¹⁰ *Industrial Union Bulletin*, May 11, 1907.

¹¹ *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 10, 1912; 1920 statement quoted in Gamba, *Decline of the I.W.W.*, 223-225; other Wobbly resolutions to the same effect may be found in *Solidarity*, May 22, 1920, June 9 and September 15, 1923; *Defense News Bulletin*, May 4, 1919.



Society's Iconographic Collection

According to the Associated Press caption for this picture of William D. Haywood, president of the IWW, "It is alleged that I.W.W. organizers have intimidated workers to quit work in all lines of work."

capitalist machinery is at a standstill."¹² Big Bill Haywood and other Wobbly leaders seemed never to tire of telling the workers that they had only to remain away from work in order to win their disputes. Ralph Chaplin, once second only to Haywood in the Wobbly organization, later recalled that he had rejected violence as a viable tool before 1913. "Squirrel guns," he concluded, would be of little help to auto workers in establishing a union and that, after all, was the IWW's goal.¹³

In addition to their theoretical rejection of violence, the Eastern Wobblies eschewed its use on grounds of expediency. Unarmed workers could not hope to match force with wealthy employers, armed police, and militia. The General Executive Board's white paper on violence in 1920 stated that "history shows that violence breeds official government violence and the workers lose their cause immediately." William D. Haywood cautioned the

strikers at Lawrence to "stay in your houses; don't let the police or the soldiers provoke you into a fight." He realized that, as the journalist Robert Bruyere wrote in 1918, violence invariably started with and favored the best prepared, and the employers and police were the best prepared.¹⁴

Moreover, Haywood and some other Wobblies had an inarticulated conception of the now-familiar idea that nonviolence often frustrated the adversary into the use of violence, and the public's comparison of peaceful workers with violent employers would channel the tide of public opinion to the workers' cause. This was exactly what happened at Lawrence and at Spokane, Washington, and the experience confirmed Wobblies in their policy. In both cities the brutality of the police and the resultant public protest were of major importance in accounting for the IWW's victories. At Paterson, New Jersey, site of a major strike in 1913, Haywood made his position clear when he shouted to a mass meeting of workers that their power rested in their folded arms. "You have killed the mills; you have stopped production; you have broken off profits. Any other violence you may commit is less than this, and it will only react upon yourselves."¹⁵

Other Wobblies placed equal emphasis on the efficacy of positive nonviolence. When Joe Ettor, the union's general organizer, arrived in Lawrence to take command of the strike in early 1912, he cautioned, "By all means make this strike as peaceful as possible. In the last analysis, all the blood spilled will be your blood. And if any blood is spilled, it will be on the hands of the millowners, for they will be responsible for it."¹⁶

Critics of the Wobblies, both contemporary and subsequent, have often singled out William D. Haywood as the spirit of violence in the IWW, pointing to his past as a leader of the violent Western Federation of Miners and his trial for the murder of former Idaho gov-

¹⁴ Robert Bruyere, "The I.W.W.," in *Harper's Weekly* (July, 1918), 253.

¹⁵ *The Survey*, XXVII:205 (March 30, 1912); "Program of the Paterson Pageant," June 7, 1913, in the Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor.

¹⁶ Quoted in Justus Ebert, *The Trial of a New Society* (Cleveland, n.d. [1913?]), 49.

¹² *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 10, 1912.

¹³ Ralph Chaplin, *Wobbly: The Rough and Tumble Story of An American Radical* (Chicago, 1948), 146.

ernor, Frank Steunenberg. Although it is difficult to tell so from some histories, Haywood was acquitted of the Steunenberg murder, and the available evidence suggests that Haywood's violent past in the WFM disillusioned him with the utility of violence rather than confirmed him in the use of it. The Southern Wobbly leader, Covington Hall, told of a conversation with Haywood after Big Bill had arrived from delivering a speech in Grabow, Louisiana, a lumber mill town. The news arrived of a riot in Grabow and Haywood was greatly disturbed. "I don't know why something like that is always following me around the country," Haywood said. Hall observed that Haywood seemed nervous for the rest of the day and left abruptly after his last lecture.¹⁷

Haywood continued to speak of revolution during his Wobbly period, of course, but it was a bloodless revolution to which he referred. "The world is turning against war," he said not too presciently in 1913. "People are sickened at the thought. Even labor wars of the old type are passing. I should never think of conducting a strike in the old way. There will never be another Coeur D'Alenes, another Cripple Creek [WFM strikes which more closely resembled small wars than industrial disputes]. I for one, have turned my back on violence. It wins nothing. When we strike now, we strike with our hands in our pockets. We have a new kind of violence — the havoc we raise with money by laying down our tools. Our strength lies in the overwhelming power of our numbers."¹⁸

SO MUCH for advocacy. In practice the IWW was consistent, spurning the use of violence in its strikes and sometimes functioning as a positive force for peace in labor disputes. While they were not directly concerned with wages, hours, or conditions, the free speech fights which the IWW waged between 1909 and 1911 at Missoula, Montana; Fresno and San Diego, California; Spokane; Aberdeen; and Kansas City were industrial disputes in that they were directed at the IWW's

right to organize. All were characterized by nearly complete nonviolence on the part of the Wobblies and sometimes vicious brutalities on the part of authorities and mobs of citizens.¹⁹ The Wobblies' adherence to peaceful demonstration and civil disobedience could have served as a model for Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

In McKee's Rocks, where the workers at the Pressed Steel Car Works struck in 1909, the IWW actively served as a pacifying force. The strike had been called spontaneously and its early stages were marred by considerable violence on both sides; several strikers and at least one Pennsylvania state constable were killed. According to the *Nation*, the strikers had 3,000 men under arms, probably an exaggeration but indicative of the temper of the town.²⁰ When the IWW entered the strike the violence immediately ceased. An apocryphal tale attributes the change to a Wobbly dictum that for every striker killed a policeman would be killed, but there is no evidence for the story. In fact, the IWW introduced its policy of no violence and the authorities conformed. Several neutral observers said that they had never seen less violence in such a large strike.²¹

At Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912, the situation was similar. The strike was spontaneous, in response to an unannounced wage cut in January. As the various spinning and weaving shops walked out independently, threads were cut, windows smashed, and power belts slashed in order to prevent non-strikers from working.²² On another occasion violence erupted when police turned firehoses on a group of pickets and they retaliated by throwing ice at the police. But that was all before the IWW took charge of the strike!

Summoned by the tiny Franco-Belgian Wobbly local in the town, organizer Joseph Ettor immediately warned the workers that they

¹⁷ Covington Hall, "Labor Struggles in the Deep South," Typescript, copy in Labor History Archives, Wayne State University, 156.

¹⁸ *The World's Work*, XXVI:417 (1913).

¹⁹ The best narrative account of the free speech fights is Philip S. Foner, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917, (History of the Labor Movement of the United States, Vol. IV, New York, 1965), 172-214.*

²⁰ *The Nation* (August 26, 1909).

²¹ Paul Kellog, "The McKee's Rocks Strike," in *The Survey* (August 7, 1909), 664.

²² Fred Beal, *Proletarian Journey: New England, Gastonia, Moscow* (New York, 1937), 40-41.

must shun violent tactics and observe absolute nonviolence. One incident seemed to give the lie to Ettor's public policy. Shortly after he arrived, Lawrence police made several raids including one at a shoemaker's shop next door to a house where Ettor received his mail. They found several caches of dynamite. The millowners and some newspapers were quick to blame the IWW, but the Wobblies denied any knowledge of the explosives. They quietly launched their own investigation when a rumor spread that the Boston Hearst paper was already on sale in Lawrence with the news of the discovery before the police had actually made the raid. It was then revealed that the dynamite had been wrapped in old copies of a trade magazine, the *Undertaker's Journal*, from one copy of which the subscriber's name had been imperfectly removed. He was John J. Breen, who had been county coroner, and was at the time of the strike a member of the Lawrence School Board. After Breen's arrest it developed that William Wood, principal owner of the American Woolens Company, Lawrence's largest mill, had recently made an unexplained payment of money to Breen. Wood was not molested and Breen was fined \$500 — mild punishment the Wobblies thought, but they were gratified to be cleared of the charge.²³

On another occasion Ettor acted positively to avoid provocation by a company of militiamen. On January 28, 1912, he was leading a protest march through the retail business district when a group of militia suddenly blocked the strikers' path. Thinking quickly, Ettor led the group up a side street and rapidly disbanded them.

Hardly did the IWW bring violence into the city, a reporter wrote at the time; the IWW stemmed it in the face of the workers' frustration, the employers' provocations, and the militia's irresponsibility. A local Protestant



Cahn, Mill Town

Urbano Di Prato stands in the doorway of his shoemaker's shop in Lawrence in which a cache of dynamite was planted and blamed on the strikers.

minister remembered five years later that the IWW leaders were "men of beautiful countenance," perhaps an overstatement. They believed in "the beautiful philosophy of non-resistance," he wrote.²⁴

While Lawrence provides the best example of IWW nonviolence in action, neutral observers testified to the same fact in innumerable instances. A woman in Butte, Montana, was surprised at the tenacity with which the Wobblies restrained from responding in kind to violent provocations.²⁵ Several government prosecutors and even agents of the Bureau of Investigation agreed.²⁶ Another woman testified in court that she had heard speeches by all the major Wobbly agitators in the Pacific Northwest including "Red" Doran, James Rowan, James P. Thompson, and Elizabeth

²³ William D. Haywood, *Bill Haywood's Book: The Autobiography of William D. Haywood* (New York, 1929), 252; Beal, *Proletarian Journey*, 49; *Lawrence Sun*, May 14-17, 1912; *Solidarity*, June 22, 1912; *Report on Strike of Textile Workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts*, 62nd Congress, 2nd Session, Senate Document No. 870, p. 39; Foner, *The I.W.W.*, 334; Brissenden, *The I.W.W.*, 289; G. D. H. Cole, *The World of Labour*, 149.

²⁴ Mary K. O'Sullivan, "Labor War at Lawrence," in *The Survey*, XXVIII:73 (April 6, 1912); *New York Times*, October 15, 1917.

²⁵ Fanny Bixby Spencer, to Nicholas Steelinck, August 11, 1920, in the Steelinck Collection, Labor History Archives, Wayne State University.

²⁶ Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters*, 104; U.S. Attorney Clay Allen to the Attorney General, July 6, 1917, in the Department of Justice File 186701-49-6; Robert Bruyere, "The I.W.W.," in *Harpers Weekly* (July, 1918), 254.

Gurley Flynn, and had never heard any of them "advocate or teach crime. They are strictly opposed to violence."²⁷ A police chief in Colorado reported that an IWW meeting which he attended discussed the question of what they should do if they were attacked by a mob nearby. Much to the sheriff's surprise, the Wobblies decided that if the mob came, they would leave rather than promote violence.²⁸ A Los Angeles police captain wrote that he was ashamed to have done the "dirty work" of the employers in attempting to provoke the Wobblies to violence. "These Wobblies are better men than we are," he said. "They show better self control."²⁹

William B. Wilson, Secretary of Labor under Woodrow Wilson, ruled that the constitution of the IWW did not show that the union advocated violence or force.³⁰ The American Civil Liberties Union, which defended the Wobblies indicted under the Sedition Act of 1918, stated that "the common charge of violence to achieve the organization's purpose *has not been proved in a single trial.*" Not a single fact "has been proved against the organization which could not be proved against any aggressive A F of L Union."³¹ The Federal Council of Churches, after investigating the disturbances in the Colorado coal fields in 1927, in which the IWW was involved, marveled at the union's avoidance of violence.³² The Immigration Bureau wrote after a long examination of the IWW that only *hints* of violence could be found in IWW writings and concluded that even in regard to "sabotage," the IWW's meaning was "not altogether clear or well defined."³³

²⁷ *State of Washington v. Pat Cantwell*, 119 Wash. 665, No. 16811, "Statement of Facts," 38, quoted in Donald S. Barnes, "The Ideology of the I.W.W.," (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 1962), 2, 158.

²⁸ "An Explanation by Ex-Chief of Police Hutchinson," in the Socialist Party of America Collection, Duke University Library.

²⁹ Quoted in Gambs, *The Decline of the I.W.W.*, 45.

³⁰ *Annual Report: Secretary of Labor of the United States*, 1920 (Washington, 1920), 78-79.

³¹ "Memorandum Regarding the Persecution of the Radical Labor Movement in the United States," (National Civil Liberties Bureau, New York, 1919), 4.

³² Gambs, *Decline of the I.W.W.*, 151.

³³ Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters*, 101.



Cahn, Mill Town

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn speaking to strikers at Lawrence.

HOW, THEN, did the IWW get its bloody reputation? Primarily it was a reputation foisted upon the union by its enemies: the employers it struck; the cities whose anti-street-speaking ordinances it defied; AF of L unionist rivals; anti-unionist politicians; and the reformist wing of the Socialist Party.³⁴ The IWW's brief age of prosperity was an era when unions were widely suspect in the United States, and the IWW represented the most militant sort of unionism. The most distorted account of Wobbly activities could be widely disseminated and believed in such an atmosphere. As Richard Brazier, a prominent Wobbly, remembered: "The I.W.W., of course, never did have a 'good press' and we were more or less accustomed to being made the whipping boys for something we knew nothing about."³⁵

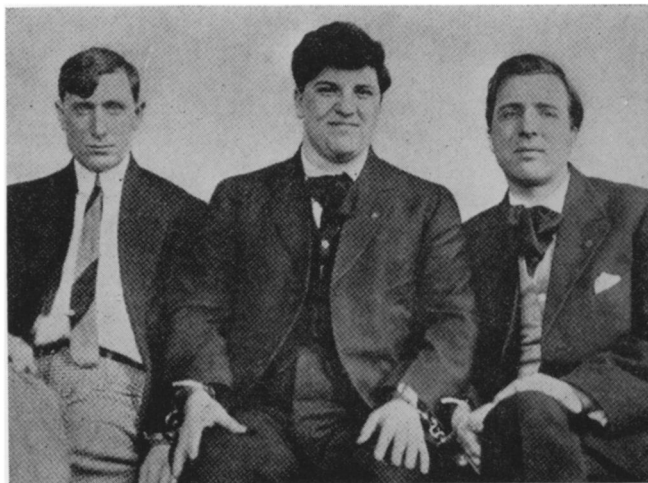
³⁴ On this final point, see Joseph R. Conlin, "The I.W.W. and the Socialist Party," *Science and Society*, XXXI:22-36 (Winter, 1967).

³⁵ Richard Brazier, "The Great I.W.W. Trial of 1918 in Retrospect," Typescript in the I.W.W. Collection, Labor History Archives, Wayne State University, 4.

An anti-unionist public's credulity was only one way by which the IWW's reputation was fixed. On various occasions, *agents provocateurs* were employed by the union's enemies. It is likely that the single speaker, out of hundreds, who advocated violence on the Wobblies' open platform at Paterson, New Jersey, in 1913 was hired to do so.³⁶ Harvey O'Connor recalled an incident in Everett, Washington, where, when an IWW speaker began to preach violence, he was pulled from the platform by "fellow" Wobblies.³⁷ *Agents provocateurs* were widely employed in the western lumbering areas. A reporter for the *New York Post* wrote that lumber millowners frankly admitted to him that "the peculiar reputation for violence and lawlessness which has been fixed upon the I.W.W. was largely the work of their own ingenious publicity agents."³⁸

In a case in which the IWW was accused of sabotage, an admitted "professional witness" for the prosecution impeached his own testimony with so many contradictions that even the friendly local newspapers were upset.³⁹ At a Wobbly trial at Sacramento in 1918, two Wobblies, Elbert Coutts and John Dymond, testified that the California IWW had been engaged in incendiarism since 1912. But, as William Preston notes, the two were coconspirators according to their own confession and were "by all odds, disreputable witnesses."⁴⁰

The IWW's implication in many trials for murder and other violent crimes has served to perpetuate their unsavory reputation. Ironically, in virtually every case the IWW was acquitted. William D. Haywood is always remembered as the defendant in the famous Steunenberg murder case, but the fact that he was acquitted for lack of evidence is widely ignored. Wobblies Joseph Ettor and Arturo



Ebert, Trial of a New Society

Wobblies Joseph Caruso, Joseph J. Ettor, and Arturo Giovannitti handcuffed together as they await trial for a murder committed during the Lawrence strike. All three were acquitted.

Giovannitti were involved in another sensational murder case in connection with the 1912 Lawrence strike but they, too, were acquitted. Over a hundred Wobblies were, of course, convicted of "sedition" during World War I but virtually every subsequent student of the affair has interpreted that trial as at best a shabby affair.⁴¹ In fact, as the historian who studied the question most closely concludes, there was absolutely "no case of an I.W.W. saboteur caught practicing sabotage or convicted of its practice."⁴² The imprisoned Wobblies were more pungent: "The liberals, bless their saccharine souls . . . usually preface a five line plea for our release with twenty lines making clear that they do not under any circumstances believe in violence. There they sound like intellectual poltroons absolving themselves from an imaginary crime."⁴³

The IWW was roundly condemned for its defense of the McNamara brothers who plead-

³⁶ Patrick L. Quinlan, "The Paterson Strike and After," in the *New Review*, II:29 (January, 1914); Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *I Speak My Own Piece: Autobiography of the Rebel Girl* (New York, 1955), 148-149.

³⁷ Harvey O'Connor, *Revolution in Seattle: A Memoir* (New York, 1954), 37.

³⁸ *New York Post*, February 16, 1918.

³⁹ *State of Washington v. Edward Aspelin and State of Washington v. Alfred Petilla*, quoted in Barnes, "Ideology of the I.W.W.," 145-146.

⁴⁰ William Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters*, 136.

⁴¹ The best account of the wartime prosecutions is Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters*.

⁴² Dowell, *Criminal Syndicalism Legislation*, 36. Dowell's conclusion, based on an exhaustive study of the laws under which the IWW was prosecuted for sabotage among other offenses, is convincing. His original work, upon which the book is based, was a Ph.D. dissertation at Johns Hopkins University, a massive compendium of data running over 1,300 pages.

⁴³ Harrison George, quoted in *The Truth About the I.W.W. Prisoners* (American Civil Liberties Union, New York, April, 1922), 17.

ed guilty to bombing the *Los Angeles Times* building in 1910, and the brothers' ignominy was extended to the Wobblies. However, in their defenses of the McNamaras (who were not Wobblies but Democrats, members of the AF of L, and Roman Catholics) the Wobblies were always scrupulous to point out that they did not approve of the act of violence, but could sympathize with the desperation which drove the men to their action. Frank Bohn, the leading IWW theorist, stated that the brothers were misguided only in the way in which John Brown was misguided: they selected the wrong tactic. "The hearts of the McNamaras were right. It was their heads which were in error."⁴⁴

The Wobbly newspaper, *Solidarity*, asked: "Must we weakly apologize for those of our kind who occasionally strike back under great provocation? The capitalist sowed the wind and reaped a little zephyr of a cyclone. . . . Let the blood be upon the hands of our masters."⁴⁵

Finally, the IWW as an organization was susceptible to being tarred as a violent organization owing to the statements of some members from the union's Western wing. Individual Wobblies who were clearly not *agents provocateurs* did make violent statements. An anonymous Wobbly told John Graham Brooks that although they refuse "to put the public to serious risk, . . . we can manipulate the machinery easy enough — from the engines to the track, we can put big trouble and big expense onto the managers."⁴⁶ Appearing before the Industrial Relations Commission, IWW leader Vincent St. John asked, albeit rhetorically: "Why should we hesitate about destroying property? It isn't ours. Instead, the employer uses it to our disadvantage whenever he can. Furthermore, he isn't careful about our property, our physical and mental power. He sends us into the mines as children, without a semblance of an education, speeds us up, underpays us, wears out our bodies, and then, without a thought for our well-being,

throws us upon the scrap heap or abandons us to the poor house when we are no longer useful."⁴⁷ In another instance, the *Industrial Worker* (the organ of the IWW's Western wing) wrote that some loggers had threatened to drive spikes into logs bound for the sawmills. "Terrible," the paper commented in mock horror. "No good, honest, Christian, gentlemanly logger would do anything like that. It isn't good for the mill saws."⁴⁸

Despite the fact that no Wobbly was ever convicted of driving a spike into a log or igniting a wheat field, it is reasonable to conjecture that these statements had their parallels in practice. The antisocial attitudes of many of the Western Wobblies were similar to those of the Western Federation of Miners from which they derived and whose violence Big Bill Haywood had rejected. Former Wobblies recall that members were sometimes recruited involuntarily. (A common tactic was to require the purchase of a "little red card" as a "pass" to ride the freight trains.) It is quite possible that several waves of fires in the California agricultural regions such as that around Fresno in 1917 were the work of individual Wobbly incendiaries.⁴⁹

On the other hand, it bears repeating that despite dozens of prosecutions and the investigative powers of a dozen states, the Bureau of Investigation, the Immigration Bureau, and the Justice Department, *no Wobbly was ever proved to have committed an act of violence*. Former workers in the Western agricultural regions, well insulated by the statute of limitations, recall witnessing no violence of IWW origin. The nearest thing to sabotage recalled by Carl Keller, currently the IWW's secretary-treasurer, was the practice of jamming a hay bailer; it did not damage the machinery but merely stalled it temporarily so that the work-

⁴⁴ Frank Bohn, "The Passing of the McNamaras," in the *International Socialist Review*, XII:400 (January, 1912).

⁴⁵ *Solidarity*, January 4, 1912.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Brooks, *American Syndicalism*, 141.

⁴⁷ Quoted in *The Survey*, XXXII (May 30, 1914). In justice, a contradictory (and more widely expressed) Wobbly viewpoint on the subject should be cited. When asked if the IWW damaged property, a Wobbly replied: "Won't we be taking them over one of these days, and what sense would there be in destroying what is going to belong to us?" Quoted by Robert Bruyere in *Harper's Weekly* (July, 1918), 250-257.

⁴⁸ *Industrial Worker*, December 26, 1912.

⁴⁹ Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters*, 132.

ers could enjoy an unauthorized rest.⁵⁰ Moreover, it is ahistorical to blame the IWW for practices which Western workers had performed long before the IWW was founded and have continued to perform since its demise.

ON BALANCE, the IWW must be characterized as a nonviolent union. The rare Wobbly statements advocating violence were aberrations, not the norm. The *Industrial Worker* was suspended by the central office for its article on driving spikes into logs.⁵¹ Finally, the only evidence which characterized the IWW as violent was verbal and must be viewed in that context. Like all radicals in American history and, perhaps, like all men not in power who would like to be, individual Wobblies spoke and wrote a great deal and not always prudently. They wrote and spoke many things for the purpose of attracting attention (just as they organized Salvation Army-type brass bands in the Pacific Northwest). A Senator from Montana reported after responding to local accusations of IWW violence that the trouble consisted solely of "a lot of intriguing and seditious talk."⁵²

The IWW cannot be exonerated from responsibility for the occasional violent utterances of its Western members; historical figures and movements must be judged by their words as well as their deeds. However, the IWW's contemporary accusers (and some subsequent historians) might have paid closer heed to those deeds (and to the words of anti-violence which are far more numerous than

the statements to the contrary). It is appropriate to recall the theme of John Millington Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, that there is a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed.

Fierce posturings are, while unfortunate and often ungainly, not sufficient evidence to convict. It was the American Woolens Company which planted the dynamite at Lawrence. It was a Roman Catholic priest who maintained that the socialist is "the mad dog of society and should be silenced, if need be by a bullet." It was an eminent Boston lawyer who maintained that the militia at Lawrence "should have been instructed to shoot . . . the way Napoleon did it. The strikers should have been shot down." And it was a Paterson newspaper which called for new cemeteries in town, "the first graves to be filled with Haywood and his crowd."⁵³ These, too, were fierce posturings, but posterity has not affixed a reputation for violence to textile companies, Roman Catholic priests, Boston lawyers, or New Jersey editors because of them. Yet the evidence which accounts for the IWW's reputation was no more substantial; it was based on words.

Historians today would not as a rule react adversely to the idea of labor unionism. But to regard the IWW as a force for violence in American industrial history is to be shackled by the antiunionist encumbrances of the past. The contemporaries of the Wobblies who affixed the reputation for violence to the IWW knew that it was a labor union which they were attacking. If labor historians realize the same the Wobblies can be studied for what they were, rather than for what their enemies maintained they were.

⁵⁰ Interviews by the author with Carl Keller, Fred Thompson, and several unnamed Wobblies, Chicago, August 6, 7, 9, 1965; Richard Brazier to the author, May 18, 1966; Carl Keller to the author, July 17, 1963; Fred Thompson to the author, March 6, July 24, August 1, 1965.

⁵¹ Robert F. Hoxie, *Trade Unionism in the United States* (New York, 1917), 144.

⁵² Quoted in Preston, *Aliens and Dissenters*, 95.

⁵³ James O'Neal, "Catholicism and Socialism," in *Wayland's Monthly*, II (April, 1915); Harry Emerson Fosdick, "After the Strike in Lawrence," in *Outlook*, CI:340 (January 12, 1913); *Paterson Press*, March 29, 1913.