

THE I.W.W.

BY JAMES P. CANNON



THE
GREATEST THING
ON EARTH

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This article first appeared in the summer 1955 issue of Fourth International (now International Socialist Review).

First Edition: 1956, Pioneer Publishers

Second Edition: March, 1967

merit
 5 East 3rd Street
 New York, N. Y. 10003

publishers

Printed in the United States of America

I.W.W.

by James P. Cannon

The Bold Design

When the Founding Convention of the IWW—the Industrial Workers of the World—assembled in Chicago in June, 1905, the general strike movement initiating the first Russian revolution was already under way, and its reverberations were heard in the convention hall. The two events coincided to give the world a preview of its future. The leaders at Chicago hailed the Russian revolution as their own. The two simultaneous actions, arising independently with half a world between them, signaled the opening of a revolutionary century. They were the anticipations of things to come.

The defeated Russian revolution of 1905 prepared the way for the victorious revolution of 1917. It was the "dress rehearsal," as Lenin said, and that evaluation is now universally recognized. The Founding Convention of the IWW was also a rehearsal; and it may well stand out in the final account as no less important than the Russian action at the same time.

The founders of the IWW were indubitably the original inspirers and prime movers of the modern industrial unions in the mass production industries. That is commonly admitted already, and that's a lot. But even such a recognition of the IWW, as the precursor of the present CIO, falls far short of a full estimate of its historic significance. The CIO movement, at its present stage of development, is only a small down payment on the demands presented to the future by the pioneers who assembled at the 1905 Convention to start the IWW on its way.

The Founding Convention of the IWW brought together on a common platform the three giants among our ancestors—Debs, Haywood and De Leon. They came from different backgrounds and fields of activity, and they soon parted company again. But the things they said and did, that one time they teamed up to set a new movement on foot, could not be undone. They wrote a Charter for the American working class

which has already inspired and influenced more than one generation of labor militants. And in its main essentials it will influence other generations yet to come.

They were big men, and they all grew taller when they stood together. They were distinguished from their contemporaries, as from the trade-union leaders of today, by the immensity of their ambition which transcended personal concerns, by their far-reaching vision of a world to be remade by the power of the organized workers, and by their total commitment to that endeavor.

The great majority of the other delegates who answered the call to the Founding Convention of the IWW were people of the same quality. They were the non-conformists, the stiff-necked irreconcilables, at war with capitalist society. Radicals, rebels and revolutionists started the IWW, as they have started every other progressive movement in the history of this country.

In these days when labor leaders try their best to talk like probationary members of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, it is refreshing to turn back to the reports of men who spoke a different language. Debs, Haywood and De Leon, and those who stood with them, did not believe in the partnership of capital and labor, as preached by Gompers and Co. at the time. Such talk, they said in the famous "Preamble" to the Constitution of the IWW, "misleads the workers." They spoke out in advance against the idea of the permanent "co-existence" of labor unions and the private ownership of industry, as championed by the CIO leaders of the present time.

The men who founded the IWW were pioneer industrial unionists, and the great industrial unions of today stem directly from them. But they aimed far beyond industrial unionism as a bargaining agency recognizing the private ownership of industry as right and unchangeable. They saw the relations of capital and labor as a state of war.

Brissenden puts their main idea in a nutshell in his factually correct history of the movement: "The idea of the class conflict was really the bottom notion or 'first cause' of the IWW. The industrial union type was adopted because it would make it possible to wage this class war under more favorable conditions." (*The I. W. W.: A Study of American Syndicalism*, by Paul Frederick Brissenden, p. 108.)

The founders of the IWW regarded the organization of industrial unions as a means to an end; and the end they had



Max Eastman, James P. Cannon, and William D. Haywood
Moscow, 1922.

in view was the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by a new social order. This, the heart and soul of their program, still awaits its vindication in the revolution of the American workers. And the revolution, when it arrives, will not neglect to acknowledge its anticipation at the Founding Convention of the IWW. For nothing less than the revolutionary goal of the workers' struggle was openly proclaimed there 50 years ago.

* * *

The bold design was drawn by Bill Haywood, General Secretary of the Western Federation of Miners, who presided at the Founding Convention of the IWW. In his opening remarks, calling the convention to order, he said:

"This is the Continental Congress of the working class. We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working class movement that shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working class from the slave bondage of capitalism." (*Proceedings of the First Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World*, p. 1)

The trade unions today are beginning to catch up with the idea that Negroes are human beings, that they have a right to make a living and belong to a union. The IWW was 50 years ahead of them on this question, as on many others. Many of the old Gompers unions were lily-white job trusts, barring Negroes from membership and the right to employment in their jurisdictions. Haywood, in his opening speech, indignantly denounced the policy of those unions "affiliated with the A. F. of L., which in their constitution and by-laws prohibit the initiation of or conferring the obligation on a colored man." He followed, in his speech at the public ratification meeting, with the declaration that the newly-launched organization "recognizes neither race, creed, color, sex or previous condition of servitude." (*Proceedings*, p. 575.)

And he wound up with the prophetic suggestion that the American workers take the Russian path. He said he hoped to see the new movement "grow throughout this country until it takes in a great majority of the working people, and that those working people will rise in revolt against the capitalist system as the working class in Russia are doing today." (*Proceedings*, p. 580.)

Debs said: "The supreme need of the hour is a sound, revolutionary working class organization . . . It must express the class struggle. It must recognize the class lines. It must, of course, be class conscious. It must be totally uncompromising. It must be an organization of the rank and file." (*Proceedings*, pp. 144, 146.)

De Leon, for his part, said: "I have had but one foe—and that foe is the capitalist class . . . The ideal is the overthrow of the capitalist class." (*Proceedings*, pp. 147, 149.)

De Leon, the thinker, was already projecting his thought beyond the overthrow of capitalism to "the form of the governmental administration of the Republic of Labor." In a post-convention speech at Minneapolis on "The Preamble of the I. W. W.," he said that the industries, "regardless of former political boundaries, will be the constituencies of that new central authority the rough scaffolding of which was raised last week in Chicago. Where the General Executive Board of the Industrial Workers of the World will sit there will be the nation's capital." (*Socialist Reconstruction of Society*, by Daniel De Leon.)

The speeches of the others, and the official statement adopted by the Convention in the Preamble to the Constitution, followed the same line. The Preamble began with the flat affirmation of the class struggle: "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common." Following that it said: "Between these two classes a struggle must go on until all the workers come together on the political, as well as on the industrial field, and take and hold" the industries of the country.

These were the most uncompromising, the most unambiguous declarations of revolutionary intention ever issued in this country up to that time. The goal of socialism had been previously envisioned by others. But at the Founding Convention of the IWW the idea that it was to be realized through a struggle for power, and that the power of the workers must be organized, was clearly formulated and nailed down.

The men of 1905 spoke truer than they knew, if only as anticipators of a historical work which still awaits its completion by others. Between that date of origin and the beginning of its decline after the First World War, the IWW wrote an inerascable record in action. But its place as a great progressive factor in American history is securely fixed by the brave and far-seeing pronouncements of its founding convention alone. The ideas were the seed of the action.

The IWW had its own forebears, for the revolutionary labor movement is an unbroken continuum. Behind the convention assembled in Chicago fifty years ago stood the Knights of Labor; the eight-hour movement led by the Haymarket martyrs; the great industrial union strike of the American Railway Union; the stormy battles of the Western Federation of Miners; and the two socialist political organizations—the old Socialist Labor Party and the newly-formed Socialist Party.

All these preceding endeavors were tributary to the first convention of the IWW, and were represented there by participants. Lucy Parsons, the widow and comrade-in-arms of the noble martyr, was a delegate, as was Mother Jones, the revered leader of the miners, the symbol of their hope and courage in trial and tribulation.

These earlier movements and struggles, rich and tragic experiences, had prepared the way for the Founding Convention of the IWW. But Debs was not far wrong when he said, in a speech a few months later: "The revolutionary movement of the working class will date from the year 1905, from the organization of the Industrial Workers of the World." (*Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*, p. 226.)

An Organization of Revolutionists

The IWW set out to be an industrial union movement uniting all workers, regardless of any differences between them, on the simple proposition that all unions start with—the defense of their immediate interests against the employers. As an industrial union, the IWW in its heyday led some memorable battles on the economic field, and set a pattern of organization and militant strike strategy for the later great struggles to build the CIO.

The CIO became possible only after and because the IWW had championed and popularized the program of industrial unionism in word and deed. That alone—the teaching and the example in the field of unionism—would be sufficient to establish the historical significance of the IWW as the initiator, the forerunner of the modern industrial unions, and thereby to justify a thousand times over all the effort and sacrifice put into it by so many people.

But the IWW was more than a union. It was also—at the same time—a revolutionary organization whose simple and

powerful ideas inspired and activated the best young militants of its time, the flower of a radical generation. That, above all, is what clothes the name of the IWW in glory.

The true character of the IWW as a revolutionary organization was convincingly demonstrated in its first formative year, in the internal conflict which resulted in a split at its second convention. This split occurred over questions which are normally the concern of political parties rather than of unions. Charles O. Sherman, the first general president of the IWW, was an exponent of the industrial-union form of organization. But that apparently was as far as he wanted to go, and it wasn't far enough for those who took the revolutionary pronouncements of the First Convention seriously. They were not satisfied with lip service to larger principles.

When the Second Convention of the IWW assembled in Chicago in September, 1906, Haywood was in jail in Idaho awaiting trial for his life; and Debs, never a man for factionalism, was standing aside. Vincent St. John, himself a prominent figure in the Western Federation of Miners, and a member of its delegation to the Second Convention of the IWW, came forward as the leader of the anti-Sherman forces, in alliance with De Leon.

As is customary in factional fights, all kinds of secondary charges were thrown about. But St. John stated the real issue motivating him and his supporters in his own invariably forthright manner. This resolute man was on the warpath at the Second Convention because, as he said:

"The administration of the I. W. W. was in the hands of men who were not in accord with the revolutionary program of the organization . . . The struggle for control of the organization formed the second convention into two camps. The majority vote of the convention was in the revolutionary camp. The reactionary camp, having the Chairman, used obstructive tactics in their effort to gain control of the convention . . . The revolutionists cut this knot by abolishing the office of President and electing a chairman from among the revolutionists." (*The I. W. W.: History, Structure and Method*, by Vincent St. John.)

That action precipitated the split and consigned Sherman to a niche in history as a unique figure. He was the first, and is so far the only, union president on record to get dumped because he was *not* a revolutionist. There will be others, but

Sherman's name will live in history as the prototype.

This split at the Second Convention also resulted in the disaffiliation of the Western Federation of Miners, the only strongly organized union the IWW had had to start with. The other members of the WFM delegation, already turning to conservatism, supported Sherman in the split. But St. John, as was his nature and consistent practice, took his stand on principle.

Faced with a choice of affiliation between the widely advertised and well-heeled WFM, of which he was a paid officer, and the poverty-stricken, still obscure IWW, with its program and its principles, he unhesitatingly chose the latter. For him, as for all the others who counted in making IWW history, personal interests and questions of bread and butter unionism were secondary. The first allegiance was to revolutionary principle.

Sherman and his supporters, with the help of the police, seized the headquarters and held on to the funds of the organization, such as they were. St. John remarked that the newly elected officials "were obliged to begin work after the Second Convention without the equipment of so much as a postage stamp." (Brissenden, p. 144.) The new administration under the leadership of St. John, who was thereafter to be the dominating influence in the organization for the next decade, had to start from scratch with very little in the way of tangible assets except the program and the ideal.

That, plus the indomitable spirit of Vincent St. John, proved to be enough to hold the shattered organization together. The Sherman faction, supported by the Western Federation of Miners, set up a rival organization. But it didn't last long. The St. John wing prevailed in the post-convention conflict and proved itself to be the true IWW. But in the ensuing years it existed primarily, not as a mass industrial union of workers fighting for limited economic demands, but as a revolutionary organization proclaiming an all-out fight against the capitalist system.

As such, the IWW attracted a remarkable selection of young revolutionary militants to its banner. As a union, the organization led many strikes which swelled the membership momentarily. But after the strikes were over, whether won or lost, stable union organization was not maintained. After every strike, the membership settled down again to the die-hard cadre united on principle.

The Duality of the IWW

The IWW borrowed something from Marxism; quite a bit, in fact. Its two principal weapons—the doctrine of the class struggle and the idea that the workers must accomplish their own emancipation through their own organized power—came from this mighty arsenal. But for all that, the IWW was a genuinely indigenous product of its American environment, and its theory and practice ought to be considered against the background of the class struggle as it had developed up to that time in this country.

The experience of the American working class, which did not yet recognize itself as a distinct class, had been limited; and the generalizing thought, even of its best representatives, was correspondingly incomplete. The class struggle was active enough, but it had not yet developed beyond its primary stages. Conflicts had generally taken the form of localized guerrilla skirmishes, savagely conducted on both sides, between separate groups of workers and employers. The political power brought to bear on the side of the employers was mainly that of local authorities.

Federal troops had broken the ARU strike of the railroaders in '94—"the Debs Rebellion," as the hysterical press described it—and had also been called out against the metal miners in the West. But these were exceptional cases. The intervention of the federal government, as the executive committee of all the capitalists—the constant and predominant factor in capital-labor relations in modern times—was rarely seen in the local and sectional conflicts half a century ago. The workers generally made a distinction between local and federal authorities, in favor of the latter—as do the great majority, in a delayed hangover from earlier times, even to this day.

The all-embracing struggle of all the workers as a class, against the capitalist class as a whole, with political power in the nation as the necessary goal of the struggle, was not yet discernible to many when the IWW made its entrance in 1905. The pronouncements of the founders of the IWW, and all the subsequent actions proceeding from them, should be read in that light. The restricted and limited scope of the class struggle in America up to that time, from which their program was derived, makes their prevision of 50 years ago stand out as all the more remarkable.

In the situation of that time, with the class struggle of the workers still in its most elementary stages, and many of its complications and complexities not yet disclosed in action, the leaders of the IWW foresaw the revolutionary goal of the working class and aimed at one single, over-all formula for the organization of the struggle. Putting everything under one head, they undertook to build an organization which, as Vincent St. John, its chief leader and inspirer after the Second Convention, expressed it, would be "all-sufficient for the workers' needs." One Big Union would do it all. There was an appealing power in the simplicity of this formula, but also a weakness—a contradiction—which experience was to reveal.

One of the most important contradictions of the IWW, implanted at its first convention and never resolved, was the dual role it assigned to itself. Not the least of the reasons for the eventual failure of the IWW—as an organization—was its attempt to be both a union of all workers and a propaganda society of selected revolutionists—in essence a revolutionary party. Two different tasks and functions, which, at a certain stage of development, require separate and distinct organizations, were assumed by the IWW alone; and this duality hampered its effectiveness in both fields. All that, and many other things, are clearer now than they were then to the leading militants of the IWW—or anyone else in this country.

The IWW announced itself as an all-inclusive union; and any worker ready for organization on an everyday union basis was invited to join, regardless of his views and opinions on any other question. In a number of instances, in times of organization campaigns and strikes in separate localities, such all-inclusive membership was attained, if only for brief periods. But that did not prevent the IWW agitators from preaching the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism in every strike meeting.

The strike meetings of the IWW were in truth "schools for socialism." The immediate issues of the strike were the take-off point for an exposition of the principle of the class struggle, for a full-scale indictment of the capitalist system all up and down the line, and the projection of a new social order of the free and equal.

The professed "non-political" policy of the IWW doesn't stand up very well against its actual record in action. The main burden of its energies was devoted to agitation and propaganda—in soap-box speeches, press, pamphlets and songbooks—against

the existing social order; to defense campaigns in behalf of imprisoned workers; and to free-speech fights in numerous localities. All these activities were in the main, and in the proper meaning of the term, political.

The IWW at all times, even during strikes embracing masses of church-going, ordinarily conservative workers, acted as an organization of revolutionists. The "real IWW's," the year-round activists, were nicknamed Wobblies—just when and why nobody knows—and the criterion of the Wobbly was his stand on the principle of the class struggle and its revolutionary goal; and his readiness to commit his whole life to it.

In truth, the IWW in its time of glory was neither a union nor a party in the full meaning of these terms, but something of both, with some parts missing. It was an uncompleted anticipation of a Bolshevik party, lacking its rounded-out theory, and a projection of the revolutionary industrial unions of the future, minus the necessary mass membership. It was the IWW.

Vincent St. John

The second split of the IWW, which broke off De Leon and SLP elements at the Fourth (1908) Convention, likewise occurred over a doctrinal question. The issue this time was "political action" or, more correctly, conflicting conceptions of working class action in the class struggle which—properly understood—is essentially political.

The real purpose of the split was to free the IWW from the Socialist Labor Party's ultra-legalistic, narrowly restricted and doctrinaire conception of "political action" at the ballot box; and to clear the way for the St. John conception of overthrowing capitalism by the "direct action" of the organized workers. This, by a definition which was certainly arbitrary and inexact, was declared to be completely "non-political."

In a negative gesture, the 1908 Convention merely threw the "political clause" out of the Preamble. Later, going overboard, the IWW explicitly disavowed "politics" altogether, and political parties along with it. The origin of this trend is commonly attributed to the influence of French syndicalism. That is erroneous; although the IWW later imported some phrasemongering anti-political radicalism from Europe, to its detriment. Brissenden is correct when he says:

"The main ideas of I. W. W. -ism—certainly of the I. W. W. -ism

of the first few years after 1905—were of American origin, not French, as is commonly supposed. These sentiments were brewing in France, it is true, in the early nineties, but they were brewing also in this country and the American brew was essentially different from the French. It was only after 1908 that the *syndicalisme révolutionnaire* of France had any direct influence on the revolutionary industrial unionist movement here." (Brissenden, p. 53.)

The IWW brand of syndicalism, which its proponents insisted on calling "industrialism," never acknowledged French origination, and had no reason to. The IWW doctrine was *sui generis*, a native product of the American soil. And so was its chief author, Vincent St. John. St. John, as all the old-timers knew, was the man most responsible for shaping the character of the IWW in its heroic days. His public reputation was dimmed beside the glittering name of Bill Haywood, and this has misled the casual student of IWW history. But Vincent St. John was the organizer and leader of the cadres.

Haywood himself was a great man, worthy of his fame. He presided at the Founding Convention, and his magnificent utterances there have already been quoted in the introductory paragraphs of this article. The "Big Fellow" conducted himself as a hero of labor in his celebrated trial in Idaho, and again called himself thunderously to public attention in the great IWW strikes at Lawrence, Paterson and Akron. In 1914 he took over from St. John the office of General Secretary of the IWW, and thereafter stood at its head through all the storms of the war and the persecution. There is historical justice in the public identification of Bill Haywood's name with that of the IWW, as its personification.

But in the years 1906-1914, the years when the character of the IWW was fixed, and its basic cadres assembled, it was Vincent St. John who led the movement and directed all its operations. The story of the IWW would not be complete and would not be true if this chapter were omitted.

St. John, like Haywood, was a miner, a self-educated man who had come up to national prominence the hard way, out of the violent class battles of the western mining war. If "The Saint," as all his friends called him, borrowed something from the writings of others, and foreigners at that, he was scarcely aware of it. He was not a man of books; his school was his own experience and observation, and his creed was action.

He had learned what he knew, which was quite a lot, mainly from life and his dealings with people, and he drew his conclusions from that.

This empiricism was his strength and his weakness. As an executive leader in practical situations he was superb, full of ideas—"enough to patch hell a mile"—and ready for action to apply them. In action he favored the quick, drastic decision, the short cut. This propensity had yielded rich results in his work as a field leader of the Western Federation of Miners. He was widely renowned in the western mining camps and his power was recognized by friend and foe. Brissenden quotes a typical report about him by a mine-owners' detective agency in 1906:

"St. John has given the mine owners of the [Colorado mining] district more trouble in the past year than any twenty men up there. If left undisturbed he would have the entire district organized in another year."

In dealing with people—"handling men," as they used to say—Vincent St. John had no equal that I ever knew. He "sized up" men with a quick insight, compounded of simplicity and guile, spotting and sifting out the phonies and the dabblers—you had to be serious to get along with The Saint—and putting the others to work in his school of learning by doing, and getting the best out of them.

"Experience," "decision" and "action" were the key words in St. John's criteria. He thought a man was what he did. It was commonplace for him to pass approving judgment on an organizer with the remark, "He has had plenty of experience," or "He'll be all right when he gets more experience." And once I heard him say, with a certain reservation, of another who was regarded as a comer in the organization: "He's a good speaker, but I don't know how much decision he has." In his vocabulary "experience" meant tests under fire. "Decision" meant the capacity to think and act at the same time; to do what had to be done right off the bat, with no "philosophizing" or fooling around.

St. John's positive qualities as a man of decision and action were contagious; like attracted like and he created an organization in his own image. He was not a back-slapper but a leader, with the reserve that befits a leader, and he didn't win men by argument alone. In fact, he was a man of few words. The Saint lived his ideas and methods. He radiated sincerity

and integrity, and unselfishness free from taint or ostentation. The air was clean in his presence.

The young men who fought under his command—a notable cadre in their time—swore by The Saint. They trusted him. They felt that he was their friend, that he cared for them and that they could always get a square deal from him, or a little better, as long as they were on the square with the organization. John S. Gambs, in his book, *The Decline of the I. W. W.*, a postscript to Brissenden's history, remarks: "I have heard it said that St. John, among outstanding leaders, was the best loved and most completely trusted official the I. W. W. have ever had." He heard it right.

The IWW, as it evolved under the influence of St. John, scornfully rejected the narrow concept of "political action" as limited to parliamentary procedures. St. John understood the class struggle as a ruthless struggle for power. Nothing less and no other way would do; he was as sure of that as Lenin was. He judged socialist "politics" and political parties by the two examples before his eyes—the Socialist Party bossed by Berger and Hillquit and the Socialist Labor Party of De Leon—and he didn't like either of them.

That attitude was certainly right as far as it went. Berger was a small-bore socialist opportunist; and Hillquit, although slicker and more sophisticated, wasn't much better. He merely supplied a little radical phraseology to shield the cruder Bergerism from the attacks of the left.

De Leon, of course, was far superior to these pretentious pygmies; he towered above them. But De Leon, with all his great merits and capacities; with his exemplary selflessness and his complete and unconditional dedication to the workers' cause; with the enemies he made, for which he is entitled to our love and admiration—with all that, De Leon was sectarian in his tactics, and his conception of political action was rigidly formalistic, and rendered sterile by legalistic fetishism.

In my opinion, St. John was completely right in his hostility to Berger-Hillquit, and more than half right in his break with De Leon. His objections to the parliamentary reformism of Berger-Hillquit and the ultra-legalism of the SLP contained much that must now be recognized as sound and correct. The error was in the universal opposition, based on these poor and limited examples, to all "politics" and all political parties. The flaw in his conceptions was in their incompleteness, which left

them open, first to exaggeration and then to a false turn.

St. John's cultivated bent to learn from his own limited and localized experience and observations in life rather than from books, and to aim at simple solutions in direct action, deprived him of the benefits of a more comprehensive theory generalized by others from the world-wide experiences of the class struggle. And this was true in general of the IWW as a movement. Over-simplification placed some crippling limitations on its general conceptions which, in their eventual development, in situations that were far from simple, were to prove fatal for the IWW. But this took time. It took the First World War and the Russian Revolution to reveal in full scope the incompleteness of the governing thought of the IWW.

The Long Detour

The IWW's disdain for parliamentarism, which came to be interpreted as a rejection of all "politics" and political organizations, was not impressed on a body of members with blank minds. The main activities of the IWW, in fields imposed upon it by the conditions of the time, almost automatically yielded recruits whose own tendencies and predilections had been shaped along the same lines by their own experiences.

The IWW plan of organization was made to order for modern mass production industry in the eastern half of the country, where the main power of the workers was concentrated. But the power of the exploiting class was concentrated there too, and organizing the workers against the entrenched corporations was easier said than done.

The IWW program of revolution was designed above all to express the implicit tendency of the main mass of the basic proletariat in the trustified industries of the East. The chance for a wage worker to change his class status and become an independent proprietor or a small farmer was far less alluring there than on the western frontier, where such class transmigrations still could, and in many cases actually did, take place. If the logic of the class struggle had worked out formally—as it always does in due time—those workers in the industrial centers east of the Mississippi should have been the most class conscious and the most receptive to the IWW appeal.

But that's not the way things worked out in practice in the time when the IWW was making its strongest efforts. The or-

ganization never succeeded in establishing stable unions among the workers in modern machine industry in the industrially developed East. On the contrary, its predominant activity expanded along the lines of least resistance on the peripheral western fringes of the country, which at that time were still under construction. The IWW found a readier response to its appeal and recruited its main cadres among the marginal and migratory workers in that region.

This apparent anomaly—which is really nothing more than the time lag between reality and consciousness—has been seen many times in international experience. Those workers most prepared for socialism by industrial development are not always the first to recognize it.

The revolutionary movement recruits first, not where it chooses but where it can, and uses the first recruits as the cadres of the organization and the carriers of the doctrine. Marxist socialism, the logical and necessary answer to developed capitalism, got its poorest start and was longest delayed in England, the pre-eminent center of world capitalism in the time of Marx and Engels, while it flourished in Germany before its great industrialization. The same Marxism, as developed by Lenin in the actual struggle for power—under the nickname of Bolshevism—is the program *par excellence* for America, the most advanced capitalist country; but it scored its first victory in industrially backward Russia.

The economic factor eventually predominates, and the class struggle runs its logical course everywhere—but only in the long run, not in a straight line. The class struggle of the workers in all its manifestations, from the most elementary action of a union organization up to the revolution, breaks the chain of capitalist resistance at the weakest link.

So it was in the case of the IWW. Simply having the right form of organization did not provide the IWW with the key to quick victory in the trustified industries. The founders, at the 1905 Convention, had noted and emphasized the helplessness of obsolete craft unionism in this field; that was their stated motivation for proposing the industrial union form of organization. But, for a long time, the same concentrated power that had broken up the old craft unions in modern industry was also strong enough to prevent their replacement by new unions in the industrial form.

The meager success of the IWW in establishing revolutionary

industrial unions in their natural habitat was not due to lack of effort. Time and again the IWW tried to crack the trustified industries, including steel, but was beaten back every time. All the heroic attempts of the IWW to organize in this field were isolated and broken up at the start.

The employers fought the new unionism in dead earnest. Against the program of the IWW and its little band of agitators, they brought up the heavy guns of their financial resources; public opinion moulded in their favor by press and pulpit; their private armies of labor spies and thugs; and, always and everywhere, the police power of that "political state" which the IWW didn't want to recognize.

In all the most militant years of the IWW the best it could accomplish in modern mass production industry were localized strikes, nearly all of which were defeated. The victorious Lawrence textile strike of 1912, which established the national fame of the IWW, was the glorious exception. But no stable and permanent union organization was ever maintained anywhere in the East for any length of time—not even in Lawrence.

From the formulation of the industrial union program of the IWW at the 1905 Convention to its eventual realization in life in the mass production industries, there was a long rough road with a wide detour. It took 30 years of propaganda and trial-and-error effort, and then a mass upheaval of volcanic power generated by an unprecedented economic crisis, before the fortresses of mass production industry could be stormed and conquered by industrial unionism. But the time for such an invincible mass revolt had not yet come when the IWW first sounded the call and launched its pioneering campaigns.

Meantime, defeated and repulsed in the industrialized East, where the workers were not yet ready for organization and the corporations were more than ready to prevent it, the IWW found its best response and concentrated its main activity in the West. It scored some successes and built up an organization primarily among the seasonal and migratory workers there.

The Wobblies as They Were

There was no such thing as "full employment" in the time of the IWW. The economic cycle ran its normal ten-year course, with its periodic crises and depressions, producing a surplus labor army squeezed out of industry in the East. Unemploy-

ment rose and fell with the turns of the cycle, but was always a permanent feature of the times. An economic crisis in 1907 and a serious depression in 1913-1914 swelled the army of the jobless.

Many of the unemployed workers, especially the young, took to the road, as those of another generation were to do again in the Thirties. The developing West had need of a floating labor force, and the supply drifted toward the demand. A large part of the mobile labor population in the West at that time, perhaps a majority, originated in the eastern half of the continent. Their conditions of life were pretty rough.

They were not the most decisive section of the working class; that resided, then as now, in the industrial centers of the eastern half of the continent. But these migrants, wherever they came from, responded most readily to the IWW program for a drastic change in the social order.

The IWW was right at home among footloose workers who found casual employment in the harvest fields—traveling by freight train to follow the ripening of the grain, then back by freight train again to the transportation centers for any kind of work they could find there; railroad construction workers, shipping out for temporary jobs and then shipping back to the cities into unemployment again; lumberjacks, metal miners, seamen, etc., who lived in insecurity and worked, when they worked, under the harshest, most primitive conditions.

This narrow stratum of the unsettled and least privileged workers came to make up the bulk of the membership of the IWW. It was often said among the Wobblies, only half facetiously, that the name of their organization, "Industrial Workers of the World," should be changed to "Migratory Workers of the World."

The American political system offered no place for the participation of this floating labor force of the expanding West. Very little provision of any kind was made for them. They were overlooked in the whole scheme of things. They lacked the residential qualifications to vote in elections and enjoyed few of the rights of political democracy accorded to settled citizens with a stake in their community. They were the dispossessed, the homeless outcasts, without roots or a stake any place in society, and with nothing to lose.

Since they had no right to vote anyway, it took little argument to persuade them that "political action"—at the ballot box—

was a delusion and a snare. They had already been convinced, by their own harsh experiences, that it would take more than paper ballots to induce the exploiters to surrender their swollen privileges. The IWW, with its bold and sweeping program of revolution by direct action, spoke their language and they heard it gladly.

The IWW became for them their one all-sufficient organization—their union and their party; their social center; their home; their family; their school; and in a manner of speaking, their religion, without the supernatural trimmings—the faith they lived by. Some of Joe Hill's finest songs, it should be remembered, were derisive parodies of the religious hymns of the IWW's rivals in the fight for the souls of the migratory workers milling around in the congested Skid Row sections of the western and mid-western cities.

These were not the derelicts who populate the present day version of the old Skid Row. For the greater part, they were the young and venturesome, who had been forced out of the main industries in more settled communities, or had wandered away from them in search of opportunity and adventure. They had been badly bruised and beaten, but not conquered. They had the courage and the will to fight for an alleviation of their own harsh conditions.

But when they enlisted in the IWW it meant far more to them than joining a union to promote a picayune program of immediate personal needs. The IWW proclaimed that by solidarity they could win everything. It gave them a vision of a new world and inspired them to fight for the general good of the whole working class.

These footloose workers, recruited by the propaganda and action of the IWW, became the carriers of its great, profoundly simple message wherever they traveled—the message expressed in the magic words: Solidarity, Workers' Power, One Big Union and Workers' Emancipation. Wherever they went, they affirmed their conviction that "there is power in a band of working men," as stated in the singing words of Joe Hill—"a power that must rule in every land."

They felt themselves to be—as indeed they were—the advance guard of an emancipating army. But it was an advance guard separated from the main body of troops in concentrated industry, separated and encircled, and compelled to wage guerilla actions while awaiting reinforcements from the main army

of the proletariat in the East. It was a singing movement, with confidence in its mission. When the Wobblies sang out the swelling chorus of "Hold the Fort," they "heard the bugles blow" and really believed that "by our union we shall triumph over every foe."

Recruits enlisted in the main from this milieu soon came to make up the main cadres of the IWW; to provide its shock troops in all its battles, East and West; and to impress their own specific ideology upon it—the ideology which was in part the developed result of their own experiences, and in part derived from teachings of the IWW. These teachings seemed to formulate and systematize their own tendencies. That's why they accepted them so readily.

* * *

Many a worker recruited to the IWW under those conditions was soon on the move again, carrying his red card and his newly found convictions with him and transmitting them to others. All the progressive and radical sections of the labor movement were heavily influenced by the IWW in the years preceding the First World War.

The left-wing socialists were ardent sympathizers of the IWW, and quite a few of them were members. The same was true in large measure of the more militant trade unionists in the AFL. "Two-card men" were fairly numerous—those who belonged to the AFL unions for bread and butter reasons and carried the "red card" of the IWW for the sake of principle.

The IWW struck a spark in the heart of youth as no other movement in this country, before or since, has done. Young idealists from "the winds' four quarters" came to the IWW and gave it all they had. The movement had its gifted strike leaders, organizers and orators, its poets and its martyrs.

By the accumulated weight of its unceasing propagandistic efforts, and by the influence of its heroic actions on many occasions which were sensationally publicized, the IWW eventually permeated a whole generation of American radicals, of all shades and affiliations, with its concept of industrial unionism as the best form for the organization of workers' power and its program for a revolutionary settlement of the class struggle.

* * *

It was a long way from the pioneer crusade of the IWW

among the dispossessed migratory workers on the western frontier, in the second decade of our century, to the invincible picket lines and sit-down strikes of the mass production workers in the eastern centers of concentrated industry, in the Thirties. A long way and not a straight one. But that's the route over which the message of industrial unionism eventually reached those places where it was most applicable and could eventually explode with the greatest power.

The Turning Point

The whole record of the IWW—or at any rate, the best part of it, the positive revolutionary part—was all written in propaganda and action in its first 15 years. That is the enduring story. The rest is anti-climax.

The turning point came with the entrance of the United States into the First World War in the spring of 1917, and the Russian Revolution in the same year. Then "politics," which the IWW had disavowed and cast out, came back and broke down the door.

These two events—again coinciding in Russia and America, as in 1905—demonstrated that "political action" was not merely a matter of the ballot box, subordinate to the direct conflict of the unions and employers on the economic field, but the very essence of the class struggle. In opposing actions of two different classes the "political state," which the IWW had thought to ignore, was revealed as the centralized power of the ruling class; and the holding of the state power showed in each case which class was really ruling.

From one side, this was shown when the Federal Government of the United States intervened directly to break up the concentration points of the IWW by wholesale arrests of its activists. The "political action" of the capitalist state broke the back of the IWW as a union. The IWW was compelled to transform its principal activities into those of a defense organization, striving by legal methods and propaganda, to protect the political and civil rights of its members against the depredations of the capitalist state power.

From the other side, the same determining role of political action was demonstrated positively by the Russian Revolution. The Russian workers took the state power into their own hands and used that power to expropriate the capitalists and suppress

all attempts at counter-revolution. That, in fact, was the first stage of the Revolution, the pre-condition for all that was to follow. Moreover, the organizing and directing center of the victorious Revolution had turned out to be, not an all-inclusive union, but a party of selected revolutionists united by a program and bound by discipline.

The time had come for the IWW to remember Haywood's prophetic injunction at the Founding Convention in 1905: that the American workers should look to Russia and follow the Russian example. By war and revolution, the most imperative of all authorities, the IWW was put on notice to bring its theoretical conceptions up to date; to think and learn, and change a little.

First indications were that this would be done; the Bolshevik victory was hailed with enthusiasm by the members of the IWW. In their first reaction, it is safe to say, they saw in it the completion and vindication of their own endeavors. But this first impulse was not followed through.

Some of the leading Wobblies, including Haywood himself, tried to learn the lessons of the war and the Russian Revolution and to adjust their thinking to them. But the big majority, after several years of wavering, went the other way. That sealed the doom of the IWW. Its tragic failure to look, listen and learn from the two great events condemned it to defeat and decay.

The governing role of theory here asserted itself supremely, and in short order. While the IWW was settling down in ossification, converting its uncompleted conceptions about the real meaning of political action and political parties into a sterile anti-political dogma, the thinking of others was catching up with reality, with the great new things happening in the world. The others, the young left-wing socialists, soon to call themselves Communists, lacked the battle-tested cadres of the IWW. But they had the correct program. That proved to be decisive.

The newly formed Communist Party soon outstripped the IWW and left it on the sidelines. It was all decided within the space of two or three years. By the time of its fifteenth anniversary in 1920 the IWW had already entered the irreversible road of decline. Its strength was spent. Most of its cadres, the precious human material selected and sifted out in heroic struggle, went down with the organization. They had borne persecu-

tion admirably, but the problems raised by it, and by all the great new events, overwhelmed them. The best militants fell into inactivity and then dropped out. The second-raters took over and completed the wreck and the ruin.

* * *

The failure of the main cadres of the IWW to become integrated in the new movement for the Communist Party in this country, inspired by the Russian Revolution, was a historical miscarriage which might have been prevented.

In action the IWW had been the most militant, the most revolutionary section of the workers' vanguard in this country. The IWW, while calling itself a union, was much nearer to Lenin's conception of a party of professional revolutionists than any other organization calling itself a party at that time. In their practice, and partly also in their theory, the Wobblies were closer to Lenin's Bolsheviks than any other group in this country.

There should have been a fusion. But, in a fast-moving situation, a number of untoward circumstances, combined with the inadequacy of the American communist leadership, barred the way.

The failure of the IWW to find a place in the new movement assembling under the banner of the Russian Revolution, was not the fault of the Russians. They recognized the IWW as a rightful part of the movement they represented and made repeated attempts to include it in the new unification of forces. The first manifesto of the Communist International specified the American IWW as one of the organizations invited to join. Later, in 1920, the Executive Committee of the Communist International addressed a special Open Letter to the IWW, inviting its cooperation.

The letter explained, in the tone of brothers speaking to brothers, that the revolutionary parliamentarism of the Communist International had nothing in common with the ballot-box fetishism and piddling reformism of the right-wing socialists. Haywood says of that letter: "After I had finished reading it I called Ralph Chaplin over to my desk and said to him: 'Here is what we have been dreaming about; here is the I. W. W. all feathered out!'" (*Bill Haywood's Book*, p. 360.)

In war-time France Trotsky had found his best friends and closest collaborators in the fight against the war among the

syndicalists. After the Russian Revolution, in a notable series of letters, published later as a pamphlet, he urged them to join forces with the communists. The theses adopted by the Communist International at its Second Congress recognized the progressive and revolutionary side of pre-war syndicalism, and said it represented a step forward from the ideology of the Second International. The theses attempted to explain at the same time, in the most patient and friendly manner, the errors and limitations of syndicalism on the question of the revolutionary party and its role.

Perhaps the chief circumstance operating against a patient and fruitful discussion, and an orderly transition of the IWW to the higher ground of Bolshevism, was the furious persecution of the IWW at the time. When the Russian Revolution erupted in the victory in November, 1917, hundreds of the IWW activists were held in jail under excessive bail, awaiting trial. Following their conviction a year later, they were sentenced to long terms in the Federal Penitentiary.

This imprisonment cut them off from contact with the great new events, and operated against the free exchange of ideas which might have resulted in an agreement and fusion with the dynamically developing left-wing socialist movement headed toward the new Communist Party. The IWW as an organization was compelled to divert its entire activities into its campaign to provide legal defense for its victimized members. The members of the organization had little time or thought for other things, including the one all-important thing—the assimilation of the lessons of the war and the Russian Revolution.

Despite that, a number of IWW men heard the new word from Russia and followed it. They recognized in Bolshevism the rounding out and completion of their own revolutionary conceptions, and joined the Communist Party. Haywood expressed their trend of thought succinctly, in an interview with Max Eastman, published in *The Liberator*, April, 1921.

"I feel as if I'd always been there," he said to me. "You remember I used to say that all we needed was fifty thousand real I. W. W.'s, and then about a million members to back them up? Well, isn't that a similar idea? At least I always realized that the essential thing was to have an organization of *those who know.*"

As class-conscious men of action, the Wobblies, "the real

IWW's," had always worked together as a body to influence the larger mass. Their practice contained the essential idea of the Leninist conception of the relation between the party and the class. The Bolsheviks, being men of theory in all their action, formulated it more precisely and developed it to its logical conclusion in the organization of those class-conscious elements into a party of their own.

All that seemed clear to me at the time, and I had great hopes that at least a large section of the Wobblies would recognize it. I did all I could to convince them. I made especially persistent efforts to convince Vincent St. John himself, and almost succeeded; I didn't know how close I had come until later, when it was too late.

When he was released from the Federal Penitentiary at Leavenworth on bond—I think it was in the early part of 1919—The Saint stopped over in Kansas City and visited me. We talked about the Russian Revolution night and day. I believe he was as sympathetic at that time as I was. The revolution was an *action*—and that's what he believed in. But he had not yet begun to grapple with the idea that the Russian way would be applicable to this country, and that the IWW would have to recognize it.

His hostility to a "party" and "politicians," based on what he had seen of such things in this country, was the fixed obstacle. I noted, however, that he did not argue back, but mainly listened to what I had to say. A year or so later we had several other discussions in New York, when he was still out on bail before he was returned to prison in the fall of 1921. We talked a great deal on those occasions; or rather, I did, and The Saint listened.

In addition to my proselytizing zeal for communism in those days, I had a strong personal motivation for trying to win over Vincent St. John to the new movement. Coming from the syndicalistic background of the IWW, with its strong anti-intellectual emphasis, I had been plunged up to my neck in the internal struggles of the young Communist Party and association with its leading people. They were nearly all young intellectuals, without any experience or feel for the mass movement and the "direct action" of the class struggle. I was not very much at home in that milieu; I was lonesome for people of my own kind.

I had overcome my own "anti-intellectualism" to a considerable extent; but I knew for sure that the Communist Party would never find its way to the mass movement of the workers with a purely intellectualistic leadership. I was looking for reinforcements for a proletarian counter-balance on the other side, and I thought that if I could win over St. John it would make a big difference. In fact, I knew it.

I remember the occasion when I made the final effort with The Saint. The two of us went together to have dinner and spend the night as guests of Carlo Tresca and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn at their cottage on Staten Island beach. We spent very little time looking at the ocean, although that was the first time I had ever seen it. All through the dinner hour, and nearly all through the night, we discussed my thesis that the future belonged to the Communist Party; and that the IWW militants should not abandon the new party to the intellectuals, but come into it and help to shape its proletarian character.

As in the previous discussions, I did practically all the talking. The Saint listened, as did the others. There was no definite conclusion to the long discussion; neither expressed rejection nor acceptance of my proposals. But I began to feel worn-out with the effort and let it go at that.

A short time later St. John returned to Chicago. The officials in charge of the IWW center there were hostile to communism and were embroiled in some bitter quarrels with a pro-communist IWW group in Chicago. I don't know what the immediate occasion was, but St. John was drawn into the conflict and took a stand with the anti-communist group. Then, as was natural for him in any kind of a crisis, once he had made up his mind he took charge of the situation and began to steer the organization definitely away from cooperation with the communists.

Years later—in 1926—when Elizabeth Gurley Flynn herself finally came over to the Communist Party and was working with us in the International Labor Defense, she recalled that night's discussion on Staten Island and said: "Did you know you almost convinced The Saint that night? If you had tried a little harder you might have won him over." I hadn't known it; and when she told me that, I was deeply sorry that I had not tried just "a little harder."

The Saint was crowding 50 at that time, and jail and prison

had taken their toll. He was a bit tired, and he may have felt that it was too late to start over again in a new field where he, like all of us, had much to learn. Whatever the reason for the failure, I still look back on it regretfully. Vincent St. John, and the IWW militants he would have brought along, could have made a big difference in everything that went on in the CP in the Twenties.

The Heritage

The eventual failure of the IWW to remain true to its original self, and to claim its own heritage, does not invalidate its great contributions in propaganda and action to the revolutionary movement which succeeds it. The IWW in its best days was more right than wrong, and all that was right remains the permanent acquisition of the American workers. Even some of the IWW propositions which seemed to be wrong—only because the times were not ripe for their full realization—will find their vindication in the coming period.

The IWW's conception of a Republic of Labor, based on occupational representation, replacing the present political state with its territorial form of representation, was a remarkable prevision of the course of development which must necessarily follow from the victory of the workers in this country. This new and different form of social organization was projected at the Founding Convention of the IWW even before the Russian Bolsheviks had recognized the Workers' Councils, which had arisen spontaneously in the 1905 Revolution, as the future governmental form.

The IWW program of *industrial* unionism was certainly right, although it came too early for fulfillment under the IWW banner. This has already been proved to the hilt in the emergence and consolidation of the CIO.

The IWW theory of *revolutionary* unionism likewise came too early for general acceptance in the epoch of ascending capitalism in this country. It could not be realized on a wide scale in the time of the IWW. But *reformist* unions, in the present epoch of imperialist decay, have already become anachronistic and are confronted with an ultimatum from history to change their character or cease to be.

The mass industrial unions of workers, by the fact of their existence, instinctively strive toward socialism. With a capitalist-

minded leadership, they are a house divided against itself, half slave and half free. That cannot stand. The stage is being set for the transformation of the reformist unions into revolutionary unions, as they were projected by the IWW half a century ago.

The great contradiction of the labor movement today is the disparity between the mass unions with their organized millions and the revolutionary party which still remains only a nucleus, and their separation from each other. The unity of the vanguard and the class, which the IWW tried to achieve in one organization, was shattered because the time was not ripe and the formula was inadequate. The time is now approaching when this antithetic separation must give way to a new synthesis.

This synthesis—the unity of the class and the socialist vanguard—will be arrived at in the coming period in a different way from that attempted by the IWW. It will not be accomplished by a single organization. The building of a separate party organization of the socialist vanguard is the key to the resolution of the present contradiction of the labor movement. This will not be a barrier to working class unity but the necessary condition for it.

The working class can be really united only when it becomes a class *for itself*, consciously fighting the exploiters as a class. The ruling bureaucrats, who preach and practice class collaboration, constitute in effect a pro-capitalist party in the trade unions. The party of the socialist vanguard represents the consciousness of the class. Its organization signifies not a split of the class movement of the workers, but a division of labor within it, to facilitate and effectuate its unification on a revolutionary basis; that is, as a class for itself.

As an organization of revolutionists, united not simply by the immediate economic interests which bind all workers together in a union, but by doctrine and program, the IWW was in practice, if not in theory, far ahead of other experiments along this line in its time, even though the IWW called itself a union and others called themselves parties.

That was the IWW's greatest contribution to the American labor movement—in the present stage of its development and in those to come. Its unfading claim to grateful remembrance will rest in the last analysis on the pioneering role it played as the first great anticipation of the revolutionary party which the vanguard of the American workers will fashion to organize

and lead their emancipating revolution.

This conception of an organization of revolutionists has to be completed and rounded out, and recognized as the most essential, the most powerful of all designs in the epoch of imperialist decline and decay, which can be brought to an end only by a victorious workers' revolution. The American revolution, more than any other, will require a separate, special organization of the revolutionary vanguard. And it must call itself by its right name, a party.

The experimental efforts of the IWW along this line remain part of the permanent capital of those who are undertaking to build such a party. They will not discard or discount the value of their inheritance from the old IWW; but they will also supplement it by the experience and thought of others beyond our borders.

The coming generation, which will have the task of bringing the class struggle to its conclusion—fulfilling the "historic mission of the working class," as the "Preamble" described it—will take much from the old leaders of the IWW—Debs, Haywood, De Leon and St. John, and will glorify their names. But in assimilating all the huge experiences since their time, they will borrow even more heavily from the men who generalized these experiences into a guiding theory. The Americans will go to school to the Russians, as the Russians went to school to the Germans, Marx and Engels.

Haywood's advice at the Founding Convention of the IWW still holds good. The Russian way is the way to our American future, to the future of the whole world. The greatest thinkers of the international movement since Marx and Engels, and also the greatest men of action, were the Russian Bolsheviks. The Russian Revolution is there to prove it, ruling out all argument. That revolution still stands as the example; all the perversions and betrayals of Stalinism cannot change that.

The Russian Bolsheviks—Lenin and Trotsky in the first place—have inspired every forward step taken by the revolutionary vanguard in this country since 1917. And it is to them that the American workers will turn for guidance in the next stages of their evolving struggle for emancipation. The fusion of their "Russian" ideas with the inheritance of the IWW is the American workers' prescription for victory.

Los Angeles, June, 1955.