

Panthers' Wobbly Prototypes

By Karl E. Meyer

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NEW YORK—What do you do about a wild sect of revolutionaries who wink at violence, look like bums, hate all police and speak only with contempt about "law and order"?

What do you do when these radicals develop an organized following among the oppressed and are led by agitators with a theatrical flair, militants who are quite capable of jumping ball and fleeing to Communist countries?

In particular, what do you do with them during wartime with its accompanying unrest?

One answer is to hunt them relentlessly, with the Justice Department encouraging local police, which is what happened to the Industrial Workers of the World—the "Wobblies"—a half century ago.

No historical parallel can be exact, but there are certain striking similarities in the reaction to the Wobblies and to the present attitudes toward the Black Panthers.

Like the Black Panthers, the Wobblies detested what they regarded as "the system" and provoked confrontations with the police by using a tactic they called "direct action." IWW militants were always violent in rhetoric and sometimes violent in deed; they were accused of dynamiting and assassinations, and their noblest hero, Joe Hill, was executed as a murderer.

Like the Panthers, the Wobblies steadfastly maintained that politics was a racket and that the oppressed should organize themselves, creating a new and just society within the rotting husk of the old. Class interest, they felt, justified extreme weapons of defense, such as sabotage.

Quite understandably, decent-minded Americans found such precepts alarming, and from the moment the IWW came into existence in 1905, its leaders were blamed for every eruption of class violence.

On Dec. 30, 1905, Frank Steunenberg, the former governor of Idaho, was blown to pieces by a bomb. Three IWW leaders—Bill Haywood, Charles Moyer and George Pettibone—were lit-

erally abducted, without extradition, from Denver and charged with the crime (Haywood was apprehended in a brothel).

The Haywood-Pettibone-Moyer murder trial in Boise City, Idaho, was every bit as notorious as the Oakland trial of the Black Panthers. In the end, with the help of Clarence Darrow as defense counsel, the trio was acquitted.

In the White House, President Theodore Roosevelt spoke for respectable opinion. The defendants, he said in a letter to an inquiring politician, were representative of those who "habitually

stand as guilty of incitement to or apology for bloodshed and violence. If that does not constitute undesirable citizenship, then there can never be any undesirable citizen."

Angered by those words, thousands of protesters put on lapel buttons inscribed, "I am an undesirable citizen."

Partly because of systematic persecution, the Wobblies caught the imagination of most American radicals.

In strikes led by the IWW at Lawrence, Mass., in 1912 and Paterson, N.J., in 1913, the plight of industrial workers was dramatized. The Wobblies

What Wobblies Said

*We speak to you from jail today,
Two hundred union men,
We're here because the bosses' laws
Bring slavery again.*

—"Remember," by Harrison George, written in Cook County Jail, October, 1918

*"If every person who represented
law and order and the nation beat
you up, railroaded you to jail, and
the good Christian people cheered
and told them to go to it, how in hell
do you expect a man to be patriotic?"*

—An IWW member to Carlston E. Parker, 1920

*We hate you! Damn you! Hate you!
We hate your rotten breed.*

*We hate your slave religion with submission
for its creed.*

We hate your judges. We hate your courts.

*We hate that living lie
That you call "justice" and we hate
with a hate*

That shall never die.

*We shall keep our hate and cherish
our hate*

And our hate shall ever grow.

—"Eyes of Hate," IWW poem by Harry McClintock, 1918.

What Enemies Said

*"The nation is at war, and treason
must be met with preventive as well
as punitive measures . . . Instead of
waiting to see if their bite is poisonous,
the government should stamp
them at once."*

—Wall Street Journal

*"The IWW will never cease until
persistently imprisoned or put out
of existence."*

—San Francisco Chronicle

*"It seems likely that IWW leaders
can here and there be arrested on
substantial grounds of sedition or
disorderly intent; and their arrest
and summary punishment would
give a salutary lesson to prospective
lawbreakers."*

—The Nation

*"I must say to you that under the
direction of the Attorney General
something quite effective is under
way with respect to the IWW situation . . . I do not think you or any
of your Western friends will be
appointed if the results which we
hope to obtain are achieved."*

—Assistant Attorney General William C. Pitts, letter to Sen. Albert Fall, 1918

*"Fear is the only force that will
keep the wretches in order."*

—William C. Pitts, letter to a former Washington State congressman, 1918.

were accused, justifiably, of manipulating the mass media through such techniques as organizing a great pageant in the old Madison Square Garden.

But the movement made its deepest imprint on the West, where miners and lumberjacks enforced their demands for a shorter work day by simply walking from the job while IWW agitators conducted cheeky "free speech" campaigns in autocratic company towns.

By the time the United States entered World War I, the Wobblies, though scornfully derided as the "I Won't Works," had become a costly nuisance to employers, who now appealed to the Justice Department for a concerted attack on the movement on the grounds that it opposed the war.

The plea was heeded by President Wilson's Attorney General Thomas Gregory, and even more sedulously by Gregory's industrious successor, A. Mitchell Palmer. In August, 1917, the Justice Department planned an all-out assault on the Wobblies as well as on other anti-war radical movements.

On Sept. 5, Justice Department agents, armed with the broadest possible search warrants, swarmed through every city in which the Wobblies had an office, seizing everything they could find, from minute books to the love letters of Ralph Chaplin, a famous Wobbly bard.

In Chicago, 166 IWW leaders were arrested on charges of conspiring to violate federal laws, while federal grand juries returned similar indictments in Sacramento, Fresno, Wichita and Omaha. The intention simply was to put the movement out of business.

As Melvin Dubofsky writes in his authoritative history of the movement, "We Shall Be All" (1969): "The men who insisted that America remain 'a land of laws' and who were charged with enforcing those laws considered the Wobblies to be degenerate and, in fact, beyond the pale of law."

This did not happen without dissent, however muted. A conservative-minded Yankee, George W. Anderson, the U.S. attorney for Massachusetts, vainly admonished his superiors, "I think the federal government should be critically careful not only to keep within



Remember!

WE ARE IN HERE FOR YOU; YOU ARE OUT THERE FOR US

From the IWW publication *Solidarity*, Aug. 4, 1917

the law . . . but to see to it that it is not made an unwilling and perhaps unconscionable partner in one of the lowest and meanest mercenary tricks ever played in any aspect of the class struggle." By "trick" he meant the use of the war by business interests to destroy the IWW.

By the end of the war, the movement's leaders were in jail or on trial, and remaining lesser fry were netted in the 1919 Red Scare raids authorized by Attorney General Palmer, who was aided by a young assistant, J. Edgar Hoover.

In a further blow, Big Bill Haywood, the most famous IWW leader, jumped bond in 1921 and fled to the Soviet Union, where he lived as a lonely and

alcoholic exile until his death in 1938.

By the common judgment of historians, the persecution of the IWW brought shame on the country and its police and added glory, some of it no doubt undeserved, to their victims. In killing the movement, federal and local police did not kill its ideals, however vague and confused they sometimes appeared to be.

The right to organize, the eight-hour day, the formation of industrial unions to help the unskilled worker were some of the key IWW objectives, and the achievement of them seems as unexceptionable today as "Solidarity Forever," the official union anthem, written by Wobbly composer Ralph Chaplin.