

The I. W. W. Convention

By I. E. Ferguson

HOW is the I. W. W. really getting along? Has the I. W. W. lost its nerve and become conservative? After the terrific onslaughts of the past three years, is it still an organization? Or nothing more than a bogey for capitalistic propaganda? Will the I. W. W. persist as a real organization, or become merged as an idea in the general labor movement of the United States? . . . There have been rumors and rumors, questions and challenges, judgments and prophecies. Let the Convention now answer.

The Eleventh Annual Convention (with some gaps since 1905), was held May 5th to 16th at Chicago. Since 1916 a national convention of the I. W. W. has been impossible. The governmental, press and ku-klux attacks worked havoc with the organization efforts of many years. Raids, trials, official stealing of supplies from persons, from the offices, and especially from the mails; conscription, deportation, wholesale herding of members into bull pens without charges, imprisonment under the most severe penalties of the experienced officials and organizers, lynchings and murders.—the expectation would be that no organization could survive such a siege with a shred of solidity. Or rather, make a showing in the midst of the siege.

The Convention opened quietly. The Chicago papers had whipped themselves into the usual hysteria. In spite of the staunchness of Mayor Short of Sioux City, the Agricultural Workers Convention had been raided, the delegates scattered, and the minutes seized. Just a week before the Metal Miners had been forbidden public meeting in Salt Lake City. They held their convention privately, using numbers instead of names in the minutes, to guard against the blacklist. The Chicago police chief made the usual threats. The City Council was spurred into passing a resolution against permitting the Convention. But Mayor Thompson remained silent. The Convention took its way. The ku-kluxing was confined to the rooms of some of the delegates; it was disavowed by the city police and federal authorities.

The dominant theme of the Convention was the conflict between organizing for legal defense and organizing for industrial unionism. The argument may be summarized in this fashion: The I. W. W. has become too much an organization for the defense of its members in the courts. This has stopped the organization of industrial unions. We must get back to our real business, let the courts do what they will. First the Espionage Law, and now the "criminal syndicalism" statutes—there is no end to these prosecutions. If we allow ourselves to throw all our energies into legal defense, we cannot organize unions—and our only real defense is outside the courtroom. It is economic, not legal.

On the ninth day the question came up directly: shall we make legal defense? This was the one session which broke away from the driving economy of the eleven days. The Convention was a business affair. There was crisp talking, quick action, no speech-making. But each delegate was asked to take the floor on roll call to express his ideas about legal defense. Some were absolutely opposed to legal defense as useless, a waste of funds, and a diversion from organization work. Many were opposed to legal defense for themselves, but preferred to let others make their choice according to the actual circumstances as they arose. The "silent defense" at Sacramento had made its marked impression. Though agreeing in principle, others cautioned that an absolute rule against legal defense would be unfair and a discouragement to those active in organization work. To wait for a revolution to take a man out, meanwhile leaving him without organization support, would be ungrateful. Also, it would destroy incentive to work. Economic defense is best, but we have not yet any general control of economic power. Legal defense, it was further argued, is very good propaganda.

A letter was read from Haywood, dealing mainly with this question. A few sentences are quoted: "Those who are manning the ship now know the course she started on, and if we expect to make port, here is what we must sail by: 'An injury to one is an injury to all.' I repeat this now to prevail upon the delegates to take no action that will prevent a complete defense for any member who

is unfortunate enough to be enmeshed in courts under the influence of Capitalism. . . . Why not review the defense, the many defenses the I. W. W. has made and ponder a moment; consider the magnificent results; remember, every fight made has counted for organization. . . . Are you going to say that the court is one battlefield upon which we will not fight?" The letter instanced some of the most striking cases and their results, the Moyer, Haywood and Pettibone defense, the Ettor, Giovanitti and Caruso case, and some others, and concluded with a plea for a defense for every indicted member.

The upshot of the discussion was to leave the question to the decision of the members, on referendum. A vote against legal defense will become effective ten days after the referendum, except as to those already under indictment.

But there was a general sentiment against giving indicted men, or those out on bonds, control of the organization. It was voted to discontinue all publications which dealt with personal testimony at the trials. With few exceptions the names of indicted men were kept off the party ballots, even Haywood getting few votes as nominee on the referendum for the editorship of *The New Solidarity*. (Later, provision was made

for employment of Haywood on the road for the *One Big Union Monthly*, and for general organization help.)

The defense work was separated from organization work, and made subordinate. The sharpest contest of the Convention came on the proposal to bar all indicted men from party offices. The Resolutions Committee split even on this question, one not voting. The final vote was by roll call, with the resolution defeated by a fairly narrow margin.

Closely related to the above, a two-year limit of continuous office holding was voted, except as to editors. This rule against successive terms in office was explained as intended "to drive them back to the masters in order to retain the proletarian psychology. As long as they are insecure they will fight. Office-holding tends toward conservatism and to the building up of a machine. This rule will develop executives, instead of forcing us to grab up inexperienced men in emergencies."

This jealousy of the officialdom hardly seems warranted when we learn that the pay for the highest office in the I. W. W. is \$4 per day. There is the suggestion that the many jailings left the organization temporarily rudderless, and this is to be avoided by a wider diffusion of responsibility and control. The fundamental idea is to have the men on the job rule the organization; to avoid official cliques.

Many constitutional changes were made on this basis. In fact, the entire constitution was re-written. Delegates to the national convention must be elected from those on the job, the officials being barred as delegates, or simply allowed voice without vote. This was a gathering of about fifty men direct from the job, and there was constant insistence on the main issue, organization on the job. The Convention went on record against workers councils at this time; also against propaganda organizations within the I. W. W. organization, both being considered as diverting energy from the main purpose.

Another evidence of the determination to build real industrial unions was the hostility shown toward the General Recruiting Union. This union has served as a sort of clearing house for new members, where there is no industrial union branch established. By lax administration recruiting charters have been granted; also members have not taken transfers out of the recruiting branches after shifting their occupations. Provision was made for enforced transfers, and for limitation of recruiting charters. Also the "universal delegate system" was adopted, calling for universal credentials, whereby any "job delegate" can initiate new members directly into the appropriate industrial union, no matter what union the delegate himself belongs to.

The existence of three separate unions of transport workers was criticized as contrary to the basic principles of the I. W. W. and in some other instances the question was raised as to when an industrial union is really an industrial union. As to the transport workers, the Convention ordered that the three divisions hold a special conference and get together. It may be added that there appears to be a prospect for the formation of an International Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union.

That there is virile new blood in the I. W. W. is indicated by the change from a three-years to a two-years qualification for office. One of the most conspicuous figures in the I. W. W. at this time, and one of the three whose names are on the referendum for General Secretary, is A. S. Embree, the general of the recent Butte strike—a two-years member. The other nominees of the Convention are Thos. Whitehead, Acting General Secretary, and R. V. Lewins, another of the forceful new figures in the organization.

The revolutionary wave in Europe has brought its response within the I. W. W., several new branches having already been formed among the Russians, Ukrainians, Finns, Hungarians and Chinese. Organization is also going on among a half dozen other foreign-language groups, aided by several new papers. But reluctance to organize is reported among those who consider their residence here temporary, planning to return to proletarian governed lands "where democracy is not a scrap of paper but a real thing."

But the proletarian revolutions abroad have

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