The I. W. W. Convention

By Mary E. Marcy

Some of us awaited the I. W. W. Convention which opened in Chicago May 5th with more than a little anxiety. A week before the arrival of the first delegate, terror thrillers began to appear in the daily newspapers. The lawless I. W. W. had issued a call, they informed us, and from Seattle to Charleston the clan of the Red Terror was making its way toward our city. What were the constituted authorities thinking of to permit this visitation upon the people of Chicago?

Commercial bodies appealed to Mayor Thompson to arrest the delegates. Was he going to sit passively and permit Bolshevism and outlawry to flourish in our midst without lifting a finger? A hasty meeting of aldermen was called to register a protest. Chief of Police Garrity assured us that steps would be taken to protect life and property and to preserve law and order. It looked as though the police were expected to start something. We would not have been surprised to learn that some ambitious reporter, or some zealous member of the force, had “discovered” opportunely a dangerous looking bomb or two.

In spite of the wails of the newspaper editors, however, and the protests of prominent business men, the Convention was called to order on schedule time. It is true that between one and three o’clock Tuesday morning, several squads of Pinkertons descended upon the lodgings of the delegates, roused them out of bed and searched their bags for explosives and firearms. But all they found were a few clean shirts and extra pairs of socks. And Chief Garrity declared that unless the I. W. W. delegates violated some law, the convention would be permitted to proceed according to plans.

The Convention was thrown open to the public. Court stenographers, by order of the Police Department, recorded the proceedings. Scores of detectives swaggered in and out, on duty, and dozed through inspiring reports on the growth and work of the various unions. Glib reporters stopped in “to view the remains,” and finding nothing from which they might weave the sort of stories required by their papers, dropped into near-by saloons, there to imbibe inspiration. For they found that the I. W. W., sturdy youngster of the 1916 Convention, had thrived under the blows of official persecution. The precocious youth had come back again; he had landed on his feet, more confident, more determined, his smile than ever.

Of the fifty-four delegates less than six had ever attended a general Convention before. We missed the faces of our old friends—Bill Haywood, John Pancner, Freshner, Ralph Chaplin, John Martin, Forrest Edwards, Harrison George, and scores of others, for they, among several hundred of the best known members of the organization, are now making the World Safe for Democracy in various penitentiaries. These were, according to the prosecuting attorneys, “the head and brains” of the I. W. W. Without their direction the organization would suffer sure and speedy dissolution.

We all know the critical period through which the I. W. W. has passed during recent months, when the taking of a job as editor of one of the organization papers, or serving as an official in the O. B. U., was tantamount to accepting a term in prison. We know that again and again as a post was made vacant by the Courts, new, inexperienced men stepped forward and filled it. The Old Guard are behind prison walls, but here, eager and hopeful, was a new group—tip-toe for the Great Struggle, strangers, most of them, to Roberts’ Rules of Order, and unacquainted with the methods of parliamentary procedure, but keenly alive to what they wanted. And what they wanted was what they got before they went home.

In the old days the various unions were usually represented by the glorious old-timers, many of them organizers, editors, officers, etc., etc. This year there were over fifty delegates straight from the job, fresh from the heart of the basic industries, all gathered together, precisely as men and women are today gathering everywhere in Russia, to plan and formulate new methods, new tactics to meet new requirements and to supply the needs of the men on the job.

We believe this is the finest praise any one can bestow upon the I. W. W. After all, the machine is the great history-maker. It causes changes and progress in industry and hence in all social institutions. And the organization that springs from working class needs in industry can never go wrong because here the workers are forced to function in the class struggle. They learn by doing.

So the delegates to the Eleventh I. W. W. Convention reflected the needs of the men on the job. Our old friend Tom Whitehead was there, and Embree, from Butte, representing the miners; Murphy, an old-time logging foreman, representing the lumber workers; Red Cunningham, from the Marine Transport Workers on the coast; Trainor, representing the Ship Builders of Coast Union No. 325; Kelly, from the Agriculture Workers; Woodruff, of the Construction Engineers; Carter, of the Marine Transport Workers
of Philadelphia; Axelrod, of the Metal and Machinery Workers, and many others.

Was it John Dewey who said that the highest type of man today is he who can best adapt himself to a new environment? We suppose this is true of men in any age. Certainly the I. W. W. as a revolutionary labor organization possesses this quality above all others, for its members have not only adapted themselves to the conditions imposed upon them by public officials during the past months of suppression and terrorism, but they have grown in the process.

Their papers have been suppressed; their editors have been sent to prison; their defense funds have been seized, their mail held up, destroyed; papers have been confiscated; organizers, officers, editors, active men have been sent to prison. But the members of the I. W. W. met the test and proved themselves. They merely adopted new methods and new tactics, tactics not of terrorism, as the newspapers would have us believe, but tactics and methods for reaching, educating and organizing the workers in the industries.

The reports showed that their papers have increased in number and circulation. The One Big Union Monthly has doubled its subscription list in three months. At the Convention it was decided that all periodicals should hereafter exchange mailing lists so that in the event of one being held up, its readers might be supplied by another.

The General Executive Board reported that there are at present fourteen Industrial Unions, two Local Unions and a general Recruiting Union with a membership of 35,000. Besides these there are now three new Unions, the Oil-Workers' Industrial Union, the Coal Miners' Union, and the Fishery Workers' Union.

The Convention decided that while the authorities had made it almost impossible to carry on agitational and propaganda work from the soap-box and platform, the fruits of past work in this line and the effects of the war upon the workers themselves, had rendered this function unnecessary in the future. It was decided to continue the methods adopted through war-time necessity. Every member of the I. W. W., no matter where or in what industry he might be employed, was to be regarded as a "job delegate," or what we would call a "job organizer," one who organizes while he works on the job. These job organizers receive no pay, but are empowered to receive new members into the organization, to give out due books and to collect dues.

The new "stationary delegates" are to be organizers in charge of headquarters, to which the migratory workers may go for literature, supplies, etc., etc. Naturally, they are paid men. What the Convention calls a "travelling delegate" is a paid member who carries "universal credentials," travels from job to job to consult with job delegates for the welfare of the organization. He may initiate a man into his appropriate industrial union of the I. W. W. at any time or any place. It was the purpose of the delegates that every member of the I. W. W. should receive "universal credentials" if he desired them.

The Convention reaffirmed and amplified the old position of the I. W. W. on the question of Agreements, as follows:

"Agreements. No part of the I. W. W. shall enter into any contract with an individual or corporation of employers binding the members to any of the following conditions:

"(a) Any agreement wherein any specified length of time is mentioned for the continuance of said agreement.

"(b) Any agreement wherein the membership is bound to give notice before making demands affecting hours, wages or shop conditions.

"(c) Any agreement wherein it is specified that the members shall work only for employers who belong to an association of employers.

"(d) Any agreement that proposes to regulate the selling price of the product they are employed in making.

"(e) Any agreement entered into between the members of any Industrial Union or organization subordinate to the Industrial Workers of the World, and their employers, as a final settlement of any difficulty or trouble which may occur between them.

"(f) No Industrial Union or any part of the Industrial Workers of the World shall enter into any agreement with any labor organization contrary to the principles of the I. W. W."

The delegates maintained the old union position against entangling political affiliations, refusing "all alliances, direct or indirect, with existing political parties, or anti-political sects," etc. And it was unanimously voted that—

"Any officer or employe of any part of the Industrial Workers of the World seen in public in a state of intoxication shall, upon sufficient proof, be at once removed from his position by the proper authority having jurisdiction over such officer or employe, and upon conviction, shall not be eligible to hold office in any part of the organization for two years thereafter."

The position taken by the delegates on the power and purpose of the District Councils was a remarkably far-sighted one. The District Councils are composed of delegates from local branches of several different industrial unions. The Convention refused to fix the powers and purpose of these Councils, it being the belief of the delegates that by serving and functioning in emergencies, the District Councils would become, or grow into, the form best fitted to serve the working class in its struggles against Capitalism. The Recruiting Unions were reduced to the active work of feeding the industrial unions.

Formerly organization work was conducted through the General Office. In future unions will carry on this work themselves. Hereafter the Central Office will
serve chiefly as a clearing house for the unions, collecting and disseminating data, taking full charge of publications and educational matter. It proposes to issue many new booklets this year.

One of the high spots in the Convention was the discussion on the future position of the organization on the matter of "Legal Defense." It was argued that a revolutionary labor union can expect no quarter from the Courts; that the Courts are an institution that has grown up for the precise purpose of protecting the private owners of industry in their exploitation of the working class; that only when it held strong economic power could the I. W. W. hope to secure its demands for individual members of the organization.

About twenty-five per cent of the delegates were in favor of putting the force of the whole organization back of any fight made to secure even a semblance of legal justice for any and all members who had suffered through their work for the union. They felt that members should be given legal aid to the fullest extent when they desired it. About half the delegates were unwilling to decide this question, which will be submitted to a referendum vote.

The two women delegates, representing the Hotel, Restaurant and Domestic Workers' Union No. 1100, gave a glowing report on the success of the I. W. W. in these branches. The women hotel and domestic workers are pouring into the organization as fast as they can be assimilated. In striking contrast to this side of the picture is the report of failure to elicit any interest whatsoever among the male workers in the same field, which affords an interesting problem to students of twentieth century sex psychology.

The Convention recommended that a call be issued to members of the I. W. W., asking them to send to headquarters all Liberty Bonds they may have or may get from friends for the purpose of providing bonds for the boys inside. Eight thousand dollars in bonds or in cash are still needed to secure bail for Haywood.

All in all, the Eleventh Convention of the I. W. W. must stand as an inspiration to every revolutionist. It was of and from the shop, by and for the man and the class on the job. Upon all points it stood firmly upon the class struggle.

And it proved one thing, that the I. W. W. is not a fixed and static thing, but an organization in the swift process of growing and becoming One Big Union great enough to include the whole industrial working class.

That the delegates were eager to join forces and clasp hands with the comrades all over the world who are blazing the way for historic changes, is shown by their decision to send a representative to attend the International Communists' Conference, and by the following Declaration adopted unanimously upon the last day of the Convention:

"We, the Delegates of the Industrial Workers of the World, in convention assembled, hereby reaffirm our adherence to the cause of the International Proletariat and reassert our profound conviction that the program of Industrial Unionism not only furnishes a method of successful resistance against the aggressions of a rabid master class, but provides a basis for the reconstruction of society when Capitalism shall have collapsed. We regard the great European war as convincing evidence of the ripening of the capitalist system and its approaching disintegration; and we hail the rising workers' republic in Russia and other countries as evidence that only the Proletariat, through its economic force and by reason of its strategic position in Industry, can save the world from chaos and guarantee the fundamental rights of life.

"We publish again the Preamble to our Constitution and call upon the working class of the world to unite with us upon the basis of the principles there declared, in order that we may, by our combined economic power, displace the wage system with its horde of parasitic exploiters and substitute for it the communist system known as 'Industrial Democracy,' thereby liberating humanity from its age-long degradation and freeing it to go forward, not only to universal prosperity and happiness, but also to a high and noble culture.

"Workers of the world, unite! You have only your chains to lose! You have the world and life to gain!"