
IWWs Not Traitors, Says Victor Berger: Ex-Congressman Asserts Worst That Can Be Said About Organization is that Members are Desperate Proletarians [interview of Sept. 6, 1917]

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“The IWWs are not traitors, they are desperate proletarians — that is the worst that can be said against them,” said Victor L. Berger, in Milwaukee, Thursday [Sept. 6, 1917], when interviewed on the raid on local IWW headquarters by government officials.

“The IWW have been organized very much after the pattern of the French trade unions — the syndicates.

“A syndicate, in French, means a labor union. The much feared term ‘syndicalism’ is simply the French term for unionism.

“A large number of the French unions or syndicates do not believe in political action at all. They prefer individual action — ‘direct action,’ so-called — to organize mass action.

“Some French trade unions, for that reason, have bitterly fought the Socialists, who believe in organized mass action, that is, believe in political action.

Bring New Terms.

“The tactics of these French labor unionists, therefore, gave rise to a number of new terms in the languages of all civilized nations, because the tactics of the French syndicalists have been imitated by labor unions in many countries.

“One of these terms is ‘sabotage.’

“Sabot means a wooden shoe in French. The term sabotage originated because French workmen, when machines were first introduced, threw their wooden shoes into the machines to damage them.

“The French syndicalists — always remember that syndicalist in French means the same thing as trade unionist in this country — believe in direct action, as I said before. They also preach ‘sabotage’ for the same reason. They say a workman can very easily and effectively fight the capitalists through ‘sabotage.’ That is, the can easily injure the machinery or the product without being detected.

All Practice Sabotage.

“In justice to the IWW I will say, however, that most all trade union men during strikes and boycotts have practiced ‘sabotage’ to some extent. That is, they have tried to injure the business of the capitalist concern which they were fighting by all means at their disposal.

“In that respect, there is not much difference between the IWW and the American Federation of Labor. The difference is mainly that the IWW are preaching openly what the members of the American Federation of Labor are practicing secretly.

“The individual and anarchistic tactics of ‘direct action’ is in opposition, of course, to the collective and political ‘mass action’ of the Socialists.

“Traitors and seditionists the IWW are not, however. And if our government had any sense, it could get along with them fully as well as the French government gets along with its own syndicalists.

Desperate Proletarians.

“The IWW simply want to make use of present conditions to get a little better wages for common labor. The IWW are also saying things about Pierpont Morgan and the war because the war has raised the already high cost of living way up to the skies. And if that is treason the government must make the most of it.

“The procedure of the government against the IWW on the pretext that they are traitors to the American people is asinine, to say the least.

“The IWW’s tactics in fighting the cause of labor may often be injudicious, foolish, and crazy, but traitors they are not. They are desperate proletarians — that is the worst that can be said against them.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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