
Statements of Patrick L. Quinlan on the Fate of the IWW

[April and Fall 1917]

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The following statement was prepared for me by Patrick L. Quinlan in April 1917:

Since the great strike of 1913, when the silk industry in Paterson and Union Hill, New Jersey; Long Island City and Manhattan, New York; and Hazelton, Pennsylvania, was at a standstill, the IWW has given no concrete evidence of life in the world of labor. True, it has been heard from frequently during the past three and a half years, but the disturbance made by it was vocal rather than industrial. Indeed, I may safely say that all the energies of the IWW during the past few years have been devoted to the Joe Hill case, the Everett (Washington) shooting, and to free speech fights of dubious value.

I have just returned from a tour of the industrial centers of the East and Middle West and I regret to state that I did not observe any tangible or concrete evidence of IWW activity. On the contrary I noticed a tendency to abandon it all along the line.

In Chicago I was amazed to discover that the central body of trade unions, the Chicago Federation of Labor, had amongst its delegates several men who were formerly active and prominent in the IWW. These were W.Z. Foster, the writer of pamphlets on syndicalism and sometime leader on the Pacific Coast; John A. Jones, once active in Butte, the Mesaba Range, and other metalliferous regions; Morris, formerly of the hotel and restaurant workers of New York, and several others of more or less importance.

In New England I found only a remnant of the former greatness of the IWW. Small organizations in Lawrence, Providence, and one or two other cities, which total only about 3,500 members, comprise the IWW of New England. Paterson, New Jersey, where the IWW once lorded it, has now an AF of L union which is larger than the IWW local, and an unattached and independent silk workers' organization. there is no other branch of the IWW in New Jersey, while the Great State of New York has, practically

speaking, no IWW representation. Baltimore and Philadelphia combined have a few thousand longshoremen and freight handlers enrolled in the IWW. This with a few "mixed or recruiting locals" here and there sums up the IWW strength east of Chicago and St. Louis.

In the West the position of the IWW is somewhat better. Several thousand farm hands or agricultural laborers are enrolled in what is known as the Agricultural Workers' Organization. All through the West they are dubbed as "wobblies" and they have taken kindly to the name.

There were rumors in Minneapolis that the AWO would throw overboard Haywood, the General Secretary, or leave the IWW altogether and go it alone.

Wherever I traveled I observed that the IWW had no standing and made little progress when confronted with American Federation of Labor opposition. It only secured headway in fields ignored by the older organizations.

The general conclusions I am compelled to arrive at are: that industrialism is growing but very slowly; that the development of machinery and the elimination of crafts will be the chief contributing cause to the successful growth of the industrial idea; that agitation for industrialism has not deeply permeated the minds of the mass of workers, though they in a general way approve of the outlines of industrialism; that while the AF of L has absorbed and is absorbing independent unions (the Bricklayers is a notable example) it is not enthusiastically adopting the industrial program. It is true that industrial departments like the metal, the mining, the building trades, etc., are in existence, but the craft union in the building trades still exercises autonomy and through the international organizations nullifies the usefulness of the departments in Washington. The mining trades alone are industrialized, but more for organic than educational reasons.

The failure of the IWW can be laid to two factors, viz., the strength of the craft unions and the unreadiness of craft union officials to amalgamate; the ignorance of the rank and file; abortive and ill-timed strikes conducted by the IWW; opposition to the industrial idea from the press and the big interests; and last and most important of all, the nonsensical talk and acts of most of the IWW speakers and active workers. Another general reason for the decline of the IWW is the psychology of the American people. They will not bother with failures.

In the autumn of 1917 I asked Mr. Quinlan to explain for the benefit of this chapter the activities of the IWW in the harvest fields of the Middle and Far West. He replied as follows:

Extraordinary and peculiar conditions produce strange results. The quick settlement of the Rocky Mountain States by men of small capital or none at all, who could not afford to provide rooms or decent accommoda-

tions for their temporary employees (harvest work being seasonal); the constant changes in the ownership of the farms, the migratory character of the population, made the establishment of a stable working class impossible, hence the roving field hands, or “wobblies,” who ride on freight trains from Oregon to Kansas in June, and from there back to the later ripening wheat fields of North Dakota and Montana.

Except in a few of the Middle Western states those roving laborers are compelled to sleep outdoors all the time and are thereby forced to carry their own bed around with them. This explains the term “blanket-stiff.” None of the old-established and responsible trade unions would enter this field of labor. Some men who were members of the IWW in the cities and in the lumber camps being blacklisted and forced to seek work among the farmers, seeing the primitive conditions obtaining, sought to remedy them by preaching the doctrines of the IWW — but in the weirdest and freakiest form. Like some of the medieval saints they glorified in their misery in being outcasts. Their songs, notably “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum,” illustrate finely this phase of their methods and life. In time they developed strength and with a fraternity of feeling and loyalty that was most remarkable for a new and scattered body that wages many fights. They filled many jails with their enthusiasts; they were often needlessly persecuted by the petty czars of the towns of the West and they sometimes brought trouble on themselves by their own foolishness.

In time they developed such strength as to be able to organize themselves into a “department” of the IWW called the Agricultural Workers Organization, or the AWO, with its own officers, plant, etc. It only nominally acknowledges the jurisdiction of Haywood and the IWW Executive Board. A case of the child growing more powerful than the parent.

It is a mistake to accuse them of being anti-war or anti-American. ON war matters and war issues the members of the AWO say: “We don’t give a hang. We are simply trying to get more of the kale for the blanket-stiff and the wobbly.” They resort to a lot of strange talk about sabotage, but it is in most cases foam and froth.

The majority of its members are American by birth. If they fail to see the value of citizenship it is because no attempt has ever been made to give them the protection that should go with ordered liberty and statehood.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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