

ARTICLE

The I.W.W. Convention

*Opens With Slugging to the Tune of “You G – D D – – – – D Jew!”
and Continues to the Preachments and Applaudings of Theft
as the Method of Expropriation of the Capitalist Class.*

By DANIEL DE LEON

CHICAGO, ILL., September 24.—The fourth annual convention of the once promising I.W.W. has been in session four days. There was so much and yet really so little to say that no real report could be made. The “lines were straggling,” they did not converge sufficiently to risk an intelligent narrative. That can now be undertaken.

Nominally, the convention was opened somewhere about 10 a.m. at Brand’s Hall. Such is the ineptness of “Headquarters” that no notice was issued of either the hour of convening, or the place. The few delegates who straggled into town had to gather the information at haphazard. And the information did not tally in all cases. Finally they foregathered in Brand’s Hall and the convention was then opened—nominally.

Nominally, because in point of fact the convention was opened a few hours earlier by a significant prelude enacted at “Headquarters.” The prelude consisted in the slugging of the New York delegate Francis by two national officers, St. John and Heslewood, assisted by Jones, Miss Flynn’s husband.

It happened this way. Francis is the Secretary of the New York Industrial Council. Through his successful labors the Council was rescued from the machinations of the G.E.B. member Williams, who, together with a set of S.L.P. soreheads, kept the council in constant turmoil, looted its finances by a system of transfer of moneys, collected on due stamps, to other than legitimate purposes, such as paying salaries to a titular organizer who did no work, and other such manoeuvres.

Well, then, Francis was at headquarters on the morning of the convention day, writing at a desk. St. John suddenly rushed at him threatening that, if he did not fill the vouchers as ordered, he, St. John, would come down to New York and “knock off his

block.” Francis had seen St. John only once before and that but for a moment in New York, over a year ago. Since then St. John has grown stout and robust. Francis did not recognize him, and answered the wordy assault, asking: “Who in h—l are you, any way?” Thereupon St. John struck him. A melee ensued, during which Francis struck back with his satchel, and then with a chair, Jones and Heslewood taking a hand in the affray by falling upon Francis.

I asked St. John direct for an account of what had happened. His answer tallied exactly with the account given me by Francis of the way in which he was accosted; and he added: “He put it up to me, and then I struck him.”

“What do you mean by ‘putting it up to you,’ did he strike you?”

“No, but he put it up to me, and I struck him. He had greatly aggravated me by his letters from New York—there is a limit.”

As to Heslewood, Francis says the affair was virtually over; he had taken refuge behind a table when Heslewood approached him, calling out: “You G – d d – – – – d Jew!” and struck him in the face. In the course of my address to the convention this afternoon in behalf of my credentials I referred to this episode as an evidence of the anti-Industrialist spirit of race hatred manifested by the national officers, seeing that Williams had used identical Jew-hating language in New York. Heslewood did not deny that he had struck Francis, or addressed him in the obscene words quoted. He admitted having done so. The only discrepancy was between his version and Francis’s was the claim that Francis was at that moment holding a chair over St. John.

The circumstance that Francis is not a Jew in no way frees Heslewood’s words from the stigma, fatal in the Labor Movement, of feeling and promoting race hatred. The display of physical and unprovoked brutality by two national officers, upon the person of a delegate, on the premises of the National Headquarters was not only a prelude to the convention, it also gave the atmosphere to the sessions of the convention.

Readers of *The People* are acquainted with one Walsh, an I.W.W. national organizer in the West, whose conception of the right method to organize the I.W.W. is by means of lodging-houses, restaurants, etc. Readers of *The People* will also remember the accounts given in several articles from Western correspondents regarding the nature of the element that Walsh gathers around him. They sing songs, the most favorite of which has for its refrain, “I am a bum, I am a bum,” and the principal article of their creed, as enunciated by Walsh, is: “Put out all Republicans, Democrats, Socialist and

Socialist Labor Party men”—in other words, turn the I.W.W. into a pure and simple physical force concern. That the fanaticism of people holding such views is concentrated against the S.L.P.—the only revolutionary political organization that, by exposing the fallacy and corruption of pure and simple politicianism, simultaneously pillories the equal fallacy and corruption of pure and simple unionism—goes without saying. Out of this element Walsh picked about fifteen specimens; called them the “Overalls Brigade”; and, to the tune of “I am a bum, I am a bum,” very much like the tune of “God wills it! God wills it!” with which Cuckoo Peter led the first mob of Crusaders against the Turks, Walsh brought this “Brigade” to the convention. Some of them, or their affiliates, were among the “delegates.” Most of them, I am credibly informed, slept on the benches on the Lake Front, and received from Walsh a daily stipend of 30 cents. This element lined the walls of the convention.

With such a prelude, under such an atmosphere, and with such a setting the convention was regularly opened. What followed was in keeping with {the?} prelude, atmosphere and setting.

Trautmann had been loudly proclaiming in the saloons that, in contrast with the S.L.P. convention which had only twenty-three delegates, “his” convention would have forty; at times he made it sixty. In point of fact only twenty-one delegates were in the hall when the convention was called to order; of these, ten were known to be opposed to the policy of “Headquarters” as revealed in the *Bulletin* during the last eight months; worst of all for “Headquarters,” these ten had a positive majority of votes; and still worse, among these ten was the delegate of the only industry organized in the I.W.W. with a good, tangible membership—delegate Yates of the weavers. Something had to be done p.d.q.

The constitution provides that Headquarters shall make up a list of delegates against whom no protests had been filed at Headquarters, and that with these the convention shall go into temporary organization. The application made by “Headquarters” of this clause was to accept a bunch of “protests” that had no constitutional warrant and were evidently instigated by Headquarters themselves, and, furthermore, to increase the number of protests by “Headquarters” themselves drawing up and filing “protests” with themselves. There were a number of such fishy protests signed by St. John and Trautmann. The logical result of such an interpretation of the constitution is that every member of the organization could file protests against such delegates as he chose, all the delegates could be “protested,” and no convention could be organized even temporarily, there being no “unprotested” delegates left to do the work. Notoriously all the protests were against anti-“Headquarters” delegates, Francis and myself among

them. This left only sixteen delegates to organize a preliminary convention with. This artificially created rump hastened to elect St. John chairman. Himself and Trautmann voting all along, I protested against the “protests” method; Katz read the constitution which expressly denies a vote to the General Secretary and his assistants—all to no effect. With the illegal votes of the two secretaries themselves voting in favor of their having a vote, the convention decided they had the right. “Headquarters” were in dire need of every vote they could scrape up. There was but one policy to be pursued in sight of such methods—“give them rope.”

These four days of the convention were consumed with the consideration of the credentials of the protested delegates.

The case of Francis came first. He was “protested” against by St. John. Francis’s local owed “Headquarters” \$50 for supplies. Supplies are not usually paid for until sold; that made no difference. A whole day the rag was chewed over this trivial matter. Delegate Yates finally asked whether Francis would be seated if the money was paid. The chair ruled yes; the convention acquiesced; the money was paid; **after being paid the convention refused to seat Francis.** Francis, be it known, was entitled to from five to ten votes.

The second pretext for excluding Francis was the bringing of charges against him. Williams brought the charges. They were to the effect that Francis and other S.L.P. men with him in New York were keeping the New York District Council in turmoil and scuttling the organization. Francis was given the floor to answer these charges. He refuted them all. As far as that went, it was only statements against statements by interested parties. Then Yates (the G.E.B. member, not the delegate) took the floor. He had been appointed by the G.E.B. to proceed to New York and investigate conditions there. Yates read his report. It corroborated Francis in all particulars. The disturbers were Williams, {James} Connolly and others such, the minority of the Council.

Francis was vindicated, but had to be kept out. The next move was still more ignominious. Fresh charges, never mentioned before, were now hurled against Francis. He was not allowed to answer these fresh accusations. A vote was forthwith taken, and he was finally excluded. In this last performance Miss Flynn took the leading part. Her utterances fitted in with the prelude, with the atmosphere, and with the setting of the convention.

The Labor Movement began about two hundred years ago, with theft. Individual workingmen stole from the employer. They had not yet any sense of Class. In the

measure that the Class sense developed there rose the sense of Working Class Dignity. The program of Class Expropriation wiped out the early practice of individual theft. The goal cleansed the method. In the great French Revolution and in the following one of 1848 workingmen caught stealing were shot by the members of their own class. These felt that theft dishonored their cause—theft is one thing, expropriation by the Working Class is another thing. Miss Flynn accused Francis of guilt for having exposed a loafer in the New York organization who peddled a contrivance by which one capitalist could cheat another capitalist. “Think of it,” she exclaimed, “we want to ‘take and hold’ the whole plant of capitalist production, and shall we play the police spy for the capitalist when a workingman appropriates a few cents from the capitalist’s hoard!”—The “Overalls,” “I am a bum, I am a bum” Brigade lining the walls, together with the “Headquarters” delegates, including Heslewood and Williams, applauded these sentiments to the echo with loud shouts—it was a demonstration. ’Twas also typical. Individual physical forcists against individuals saw their reflexion in individual theft upon individual capitalists.

When the convention voted Francis out, delegate Yates, who fought bravely all along, and whose brother, the G.E.B. member, calling a spade a spade, bluntly declared that the majority had decided to have its way by hook or crook—delegate Yates moved that Francis be returned the money, because “it was obtained under pretence.” The convention voted that down in short order.

And so it went on until my credentials were reached. They were protested against by two individuals in New York who have been all along acting in collusion with “Headquarters.” Their objection was that I did not industrially belong to the Local of which I am a member. When I addressed the convention I argued that the theory on which the protest was based was wrong; that, even if it were right, to exclude me on that ground was transparently a false pretence. I had been accredited to all the previous conventions from the identical Local. No objection was raised then, why raise it now, not as a demand that I join the Local to which it is claimed that I should belong, but by disfranchising my constituency? (I had four votes). I showed, with the documents right there, that since July a year ago the *Bulletin* had been gradually turned into a sheet for partisan politics; that the letter and spirit of the organic formation of the I.W.W. had been violated by the *Bulletin* with the sanction of the G.E.B. members, Yates and Katz excepted; that the National Secretary and St. John, his assistant, had taken a direct hand in the misdeed, and I charged them with being the cause that the I.W.W. is now on the rocks, and that it was they, not me, who should be kept out of the convention. I closed with the remark that they would deceive nobody by rejecting my credentials on the ground alleged. It would be clear to all that the

purpose was to condone a policy which radically altered and would completely wreck the organization My credentials were rejected this afternoon, Miss Flynn taking a leading part in the move. She came armed with “affidavits” and other “documents.”

I had occasion to refer to the language of Miss Flynn in the matter of theft, as one that dragged the character of the Labor Movement through the mire. Recorded should be the argument of St. John in answer to me. He referred to the present Russian Revolution. The revolutionists had temporary possession of the city of Moscow. Some wanted to repeat the move that had been made against Napoleon. They wanted to burn down the city, or a certain part of it where the enemy had large supplies. The sentimentalists objected on the ground that it was destroying property. Presently the Cossack reinforcements arrived, and the supplies were used with deadly effect. The revolutionists were massacred. The organized revolutionary plan of burning the supplies St. John held to be parallel with the individual act of individual theft. As to the historic events I had quoted from the two French Revolutions, he considered that the act of the revolutionists in shooting down workingmen caught stealing was not an evidence of enlightenment; it was an evidence of the backward state of the minds of the revolutionists who “considered the property of their masters more precious than the lives of the workingmen who stole.” In other words, the difference is a closed book to “Headquarters” and their delegates between the proletariat proper, and the “slum-proletariat”—the former of which is the carrier of the Social Revolution, while the latter, Socialist classics teach, is the first to join any movement, and the first to desert and betray it.

Many more incidents could be cited of the level on which the “revolutionists,” who are running the convention, are floundering.

The last “protested” credentials to be acted on were those of Richter of Detroit. There being no longer any danger of being outvoted, “Headquarters” allowed the credentials to be accepted. Richter then rose and said: “Mr. Chairman, in view of what I have witnessed here, I decline a seat in your convention.”

With the finishing of the contests, the convention will enter upon its “Second Act” tomorrow. What the nature of that and the closing Act will be, the first Act, from the prelude down till to-day, clearly foreshadows.

The epilogue will also fitly round up the play.

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