

An Anonymous Man Explains Why He Is a Wobbly
from Michael Johnson, Reading the American Past, 96-98

Progressive reformers concentrated their attention on large cities, and most labor unions focused on big factories. Many working people moved from job to job in small towns, in western mining and logging camps, or from farm to farm as migratory laborers in fields of wheat, sugar beets, grapes, or vegetables. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), formed in Chicago in 1905, tried to organize these scattered workers under the tent of One Big Union dedicated to overthrowing capitalism. The IWW- or Wobblies, as they were called- attracted many working people throughout the west. One of them wrote an anonymous account of why he became a Wobbly- an account that illustrates the appeal of revolutionary doctrines rejected by Progressives. Although written in 1922, it is quite representative of the IWW in the Progressive Era.

'Why I Am a Member of the IWW, 1922,' Four L Bulletin, reprinted from Joyce L. Kornbluh, ed. Rebel Voices, an IWW anthology (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964) 286-289

I come from a part of Europe which furnishes a very large percent- age of the loggers in the northwest.

As to my past I might say that life has offered me a very varied bill of fare. From my seventh to my fourteenth year I generally put in from seven to eight months a year at the 'point of production.' We kids in the sugar beet fields of southern Sweden began our day at 6 A.m. and were kept busy until 8 P.m., with three rests a day, totaling altogether two hours, making a twelve-hour day. You can easily imagine how much time we had for play or study and how physically fit we were for either.

So my childhood was lost and I was an old man at 14, when I struck a job in a grocery store, and at the age of 23 I found myself manager for quite a large business enterprise in my native country- -a co-operative association composed of several thousand members . . .

At the age of 25 I emigrated to the United States. To me it was not a question of journeying to some place where I hoped to gain fortune and fame. It was merely the satisfying of a desire for adventure and for knowledge of the world, a desire long suppressed for reasons of entirely personal nature. My first job in this country was in a packing plant at South St. Paul, Minn. There I received a splendid illustration of Upton Sinclair's book, 'the Jungle,' perhaps the most read book in Sweden at the time of my departure. It was a ten-hour day, with lots of overtime at regular pay, 16 1/2 cents per hour. Never do I see a sign advertising a certain brand of ham and bacon without thinking of the terrible high premium in sweat and blood, in misery and starvation, in ignorance and degeneration, the workers in those establishments have to pay before these products reach your table.

I turned down offers to again enter the commercial field back in Minnesota in order to be able to study another class of men, the man of the .wild west," as well as the wild west itself, and early in March, 1910, I headed for this coast.

I'll never forget my first experience in camp. It was a railroad camp up in the Rockies. I was tired after the hike with my bundle on my back, and attempted to sit down on a bed, the only furniture I could see that would furnish me a rest. Before I could accomplish the deed I was told in a very sharp voice in my mother tongue not to do so. I moved a little and tried another bed, when another Swede gave a similar command. After a third experiment which ended in a similar way, I got kind of peeved and began to lecture my countrymen a little as to civilized manners, when one of the boys explained: "We only warn you so as not to get lousy."

Suffice it to say that I made no more attempts to rest in that camp, but took a freight train that very evening and stayed two nights and one day in a box car before I, nearly froze to death, was dumped off at Hill- yard, Wash., penniless, with no one I knew, and unable to speak a word in English. Shortly after this incident I found myself in a logging camp in Idaho, across from the city of Coeur d'Alene. It was double beds two stories high, sleep on straw, work eleven to twelve hours per day, but the board was fairly good. I stayed there for several months, mostly because I wanted to stay away from my countrymen in order to learn the language. From there I went to British Columbia. Put in one year in a logging camp in the Frazer Valley and then one year and a half in a railroad camp on the Kettle Valley railroad. It was here aligned myself with the I.W.W., and may I state that there was no delegate in that camp, and, to the best of my knowledge, not one member, I went over a hundred miles into Vancouver, B.C., to get that 'little red card."

Why did I do it? The reasons were many. While young I had associated myself with the prohibitionists, joining the Independent Order of Good Templars. I soon came to the conclusion that the liquor traffic itself is but a natural outgrowth of our existing social system, and that I could not abolish it without a fundamental change in society itself.

When working on the Kettle Valley road I observed quite a few interesting facts in this connection. Of over three thousand workers employed for a couple of years I doubt if there were two dozen men who left that job with sufficient funds to carry them for two months. The general routine was to work for a month, draw your check, go down to a little town named Hope (the most hopeless city I've seen) composed of two very of dirty rooming houses, a couple of stores and half dozen houses of prostitution, and to spend in a day or two, your every nickel in either the saloons or the brothels, usually in both....

The I.W.W. seemed to me then and seems to me now the only group offering me any sensible program under which I could operate with a view of gaining these good things in life, and such changes in society as I desired. The I.W.W. declared that our real ruler is our boss. He decides our wages and thereby our standard of living, our pleasure or our misery, our education as well as the education of our children, our health and our comfort in life; in fact, he almost decides if we shall be allowed to live. The I-W-W- also told me that by uniting with my fellow-workers in the industry and all industries combined into One Big union of all the workers, we could successfully combat our masters' one Big Union and gain the good things in life. We did not need to live in misery, we did not need to be ignorant for lack of time and access to study. And furthermore, we would become trained and organized for our final task, the control and management of industries. And as this program met my demands I naturally joined the I.W.W.

Some particular influences caused me to devote my whole life to the organization, and I am sure that perhaps thousands of others have been similarly influenced and simply forced to align themselves with the movement.

I knew a young, fellow-worker in Seattle, by name Gust Johnson. He was only a little more than 20 years of age, a very quiet and very studious fellow. He surely had the courage of his convictions and he practiced what he preached to the limit of his ability. He was refined in manners, exceedingly clean, neat and orderly. He had been in the United States for about two years, when the Everett free-speech fight took place. He went on board the Verona to go with the bunch to Everett on the fifth of November, 1916, to assist in enforcing the constitutional right of free speech and free assemblage. In the shooting that followed Gust Johnson was the first one who fell with a bullet through his heart. Gust Johnson, who would hesitate even to kill a fly, Gust Johnson, to whom violence and disorder were an Abhorrence.

I did what every one of you would have done for a true friend on whom such a cruel outrage had been committed. I threw myself into the harness and faithfully worked for the defense of the seventy-two victims, unjustly arrested, until the day of their release, and until the memory of Gust Johnson and the other four victims of the Everett tragedy stood shining bright before their relatives and their class.

During this defense work I got acquainted with another countryman of mine who toured the country in behalf of the I.W.W. His name is Ragnar Johanson. Ragnar has all the advantages in life which I lack. He is well educated, well built, handsome, a gifted orator and accomplished writer. Now there is no intelligent human being who thinks that any question can be solved by violence. So Ragnar's theme has always been: 'Violence signifies weakness; reason, strength.' In hundreds of lectures I have heard this man urge his fellow-workers to educate themselves, to study and organize, but never have I heard him utter one word about using brutal force or violence to accomplish their ends. On the contrary he has always argued against all such teachings as being Harmful and detrimental to the workers as a class or as individuals. Where is Ragnar Johanson now? He is serving ten years in the Leavenworth, Kan., federal prison, together with about seventy other fellow-workers who are my personal acquaintances or friends.

And lastly, although I am a foreigner, it is only because I am in America that I am an I.W.W. For, contrary to the belief of many, the IWW is an outgrowth of advanced economic developments in America, and the Italian, the Russian or the Swede that you may find in the organization here would not have been 'wobblies' had they remained in their native countries.

The economic law which says 'that commodities shall be produced by that method which allows for the least expenditure of human labor' is the real ruler of society. This law cannot be abrogated by any combinations, trusts, monopolies, parties or organizations of any kind.... At present time production on large scale affords the greatest conformity to this law, hence the success of the trusts and the great, industrial combinations. United States, with its immensely large natural resources and its shortage of labor power **in** years gone by has offered the best opportunity for the development of machine production on a large scale, while -at the same time the aforesaid shortage of labor power has served as a spur to progress in

this direction. The result is that no country in the world is so far advanced industrially, as the U. S., particularly in leading industries, such as agriculture, mining, lumbering and manufacturing of machinery and means of locomotion.

The saving of labor power appears through a thorough-going specialization of the work, through elimination of competition by means of amalgamations into large trusts whereby unnecessary labor in management in advertising, in salesmanship, and in distribution are avoided, and at the same time over-production with its loss of values in perishable goods, etc., is limited to a minimum. The trust is the bosses' One Big Union whereby they not only control the price on labor power, but also safeguard themselves against waste of labor power.

The I.W.W. is the result of the trust, the bosses' One Big Union. As the trust becomes universal, succeeds in organizing the industries inter- nationally, so will the I.W.W. expand. As the trust is the logical outcome of technical progress in our mode of production, is a means by which commodities can be produced with a smaller expenditure of human labor **than** under a competitive system, so is the I.W.W. [an] outcome of the same forces whose object is to counteract the power of the trust and ultimately take full control of the trusts and the means of production for the benefit of mankind as a whole. Neither of them can be talked, written or legislated away. Let's make an effort to understand them and the underlying causes for their existence, and much suffering and much hatred will be avoided.