

IWW Free Speech Fights

Julie Herrada

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Because of the IWW's mission to organize all workers into One Big Union, immigrants, migrants, blacklisted, unskilled, itinerant, and other hard-to-reach workers were sought by Wobbly organizers as potential members. Organizers weren't allowed into the shops, factories, or lumber camps, so they congregated on street corners and in town squares where they would address workers from soapboxes, urging them to join the union.

Company owners, aware of the methods used to organize their employees, put pressure on local governments to enact and enforce ordinances against street speaking. The Wobblies decided to defy local ordinances restricting their First Amendment rights and their struggles became known as the Free Speech Fights. Between 1909 and 1916 such challenges took place in several cities, including Missoula, Spokane, Denver, Kansas City, Duluth, Fresno, and San Diego.

Police would arrest the Wobblies as soon as they stepped up to speak, often before they could even say, "Fellow Workers." Some began reading from the U.S. Constitution or the Bill of Rights, adding further irony to the situation. As soon as one was arrested, another would take his place on the soapbox, and before long the local jails were full of Wobblies.

Telegrams were sent out around the country asking any "footloose" Wobs to come and take their turn on the soapbox. Hundreds usually responded, hopping freights just as they would to find work. City officials were not prepared for the onslaught of inmates resulting from the arrests. The entire local judicial system would be clogged with free speech cases. Residents complained, and eventually the city government would give in, dropping all charges and releasing the prisoners in city after city to return to their soap boxing for One Big Union.

The 1912 San Diego free speech fight was not the first, but was the longest running (18 months) and one of the bloodiest. A well organized vigilante committee was established by the bosses to try to prevent IWWs from coming to San Diego.

Once there, Wobblies faced the prospect of beatings, torture, kidnapping, and even death. Often, the right-wing thugs deported them (which usually meant being dumped out in the desert). Free speech fighters were sprayed with fire hoses. Vigilantes raided and trashed the IWW headquarters and the local press published vicious anti-IWW propaganda.

Anarchist Emma Goldman was invited to give a speech to the workers just as the struggle took on an increasingly ugly character. She describes the incident in her autobiography, *Living My Life*. Although she was warned by the vigilantes not to speak, she and her comrade Ben Reitman ignored the threats. While the Police Chief and Mayor were trying to convince Goldman to cancel her talk, Reitman was kidnapped by vigilantes and taken to the desert. There, he was tortured for hours, had IWW burned into his flesh, and finally tarred and feathered before being put on a train to Los Angeles.

Despite the violence and repression committed against the IWW, it won its free speech fights, including in San Diego, and as a result gained a great deal of recognition and credibility from the working class.

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