

What Is The I. W. W.?

IN ANSWER TO F. J. McNEY.

Editor's Note: The following articles have reference to two articles by F. J. McNEY which appeared in the "Western Clarion" of November 1st and 16th, 1922. Comrade McNEY's reply, as under, covers only the criticism of Comrade Thompson; at the time of writing he had no opportunity to read the criticism of Comrade Mackay.

BY F. W. THOMPSON.

SINCE McNEY propounds the question in his headline and does not answer it, presumably he is unacquainted with the answer. So I will inform him in the first place that the I. W. W. is neither an aspiration, nor a scheme, nor a theory, but primarily a fact—a bond of actual living workingmen organized in such a manner as circumstances have proved most appropriate for getting as much for their labor-power out of the employing class as possible, and consciously working toward the elimination of that employing class and of all the misery and disorder that goes with it. If McNEY is unaware of the fact that the I. W. W. is such a reality, his capitalist masters are well aware of it as is demonstrated by their very evident distaste for the I. W. W.

McNEY's many fallacies appear to proceed from an inability to differentiate between a universal principle and the exigencies of a particular problem. To instance the matter of sabotage: If a group of workers, whether Wobblies or otherwise (i.e., unwise), at any point in the struggle deem it advisable to use sabotage they will do so and it is neither necessary nor necessarily desirable that they be told to do so in a pamphlet from headquarters. Or to take McNEY's other instance of "filling the jails:" There is a strike on at present on the waterfront in Portland, Ore. The powers that be in that city decided to arrest all Wobblies on sight. Foot-loose Wobblies wandered into Portland and filled the jails—and got them empty again too. They came in such numbers that the masters in that city had to discard their jailing policy. To grant that such methods do not overthrow capitalism does not dispose of the fact that here a particular problem has been solved by this particular tactic.

McNEY's article is mostly concerned with politics. Many Marxists have become accustomed to use the term politics to describe in general the relation that subsists between a governing and a governed class. If they wish to so use the term there is no stopping them; but I would recommend that they call parliamentarism parliamentarism, the class struggle the class struggle and bullets bullets. But while using the term as they please they will surely note that current convention has made the term politics practically synonymous with parliamentarism. It would be ridiculous for a man with a Fahrenheit thermometer to argue with one who had a Centigrade whether water commenced freezing at 32° or at 0°. And it would be equally ridiculous for me to argue out Wobbly quotations insofar as the term politics coincides with parliamentarism for, no doubt, McNEY would be far from recommending such as the means of workingclass emancipation.

However it seems that in the passages taken from "What is the I. W. W.?" the term politics is used in much the sense that McNEY ascribes to it. Omitting parliamentarism, we come to the armed overthrow of the powers that be. McNEY will probably agree that the chances do not look particularly bright for doing so. Engles appears to have seen its impracticability with the advent of the machine gun. Considering the variety of gases in modern military use, the efficiency of the aeroplane, and some of the more recent productions in hand grenades, the practicability of armed overthrow as fundamental to working class revolution is reduced to zero. True, these could be used against strikers and may be so used. Yet, for our masters to use them against a disorganized mob attacking what popular political superstition supposes to be the citadels of their power, is but to save their hides; while to use them to destroy men organized as units of produc-

tion is to cut off their own bread and butter. Bullets may be incidental to the revolution, but only incidental. The real revolution consists in the workers acquiring possession of the means of production. From this they are restrained by the State, which, true enough, is a reality. So, some suggest that we capture the State. It is recorded of a philosophic hobo that on seeing a dog run after a train he wondered what the dog would do with it if he did catch it. Marx, Engels and Lenin all inform us that all we could do with the existing State machinery if we did get it, is to get rid of it. No doubt it is a good thing to be rid of, but that scarcely makes it a primary objective.

By acquiring control through revolutionary industrial unionism of the process and means of production, we destroy the basis upon which the state rests, we destroy the means by which it operates. Large bodies of troops can be rapidly moved on land only by trains. Strikes have shown that skilled men are necessary to keep the railroads running. There are left autos and aeroplanes. Both require "gas." Current demand stops any large accumulation of crude oil and especially of gasoline. The producers of oil can therefore decide whether or not it shall be used against the working class.

At best the social revolution is a gory than a rosy prospect, and there are but two ameliorating factors in it—education and organization. If McNEY cannot see the advantages of the latter it would be well were he to stick to the former. For both are necessary, and the I. W. W. carries on both. Good Wobblies, instead of philosophizing on which of the two is the more important will do their damndest with both. Should a group of workers think they could enhance their educational activities by parliamentary participation and organize a political party for that purpose, the I. W. W. Constitution provides that while the organization as such cannot ally itself with any party "or anti-political sect," its individual members may, but it "disclaims responsibility for any individual opinion or act which may be at variance with the purposes (of concentrating on the industrial battlefield) herein expressed." If members of the I. W. W. have not joined any such party it is because they have deemed no party beneficial to their interests, and looking over the current political life of the U. S., McNEY will no doubt agree that there is not much amiss in their having reached that conclusion.

The general trend of McNEY's article might have been compressed in the silly syllogism:

All class struggles are political struggles.

The I. W. W. does not engage in politics.

Therefore, the I. W. W. does not engage in the class struggle.

But the weariest round of illogical gyrations cannot remove the fact that the I. W. W. is very much in the class struggle and in it is performing a very necessary and desirable function. While McNEY is wondering if the I. W. W. has gone and got religion, Wobblies are delighting the American populace with the strains of "We'll have pie in the sky when we die." While McNEY is arguing on the premises of his dictionary in disregard of all premises of fact, that the I. W. W. is not a revolutionary organization, the latter is lining up wage-plugs with applications for membership that read: "Will you study the principles of the organization and make yourself acquainted with its purposes?"—and, moreover, seeing to it that the membership lives up to that promise.

Much more objection could be raised to McNEY's article, but this will suffice for the present. And it will have well served its purpose if it impresses any Marxist with the fact that it is important for us to understand the labor movement, out of which alone can arise the force to overthrow capitalism, as it is, rather than as organizational prejudices might make us wish to see it.

REPLY BY F. J. McNEY.

BEFORE I read Comrade Thompson's criticism I thought I might have a job on my hands to answer it. After reading it I came to the conclusion that it did not require an answer; it answers itself. However, I suppose I may as well comment on it a little just to be sociable, or disagreeable, as the case may be.

As there appears to be some misunderstanding regarding my purpose in writing the articles, I might say it was much the same as my purpose in writing any other article, merely a malicious and depraved desire to inflict my personal and pernicious opinions upon an innocent and unsuspecting public. I hold that the opinions and "beliefs" criticized in the passages quoted, which are samples of the I. W. W. propaganda, are reactionary, are detrimental to the revolutionary movement and a hindrance to working class education. Such propaganda, coming from capitalist class apologists or from working class organizations that do not claim to be revolutionary is bad enough, but coming from a working class organization that claims to be revolutionary it is much worse. If the I. W. W. position is correct the Socialist position is not, and no garbling of dialectics can reconcile the two. Or you may put it this way. If Comrade Thompson's opinion is correct, my opinion is not. Again, we may both be mistaken. For mark this: Nothing that I say and nothing that Comrade Thompson says can decide anything. We merely put the proposition before you as we see it, from our various points of view. Use your own judgment, and decide for yourselves.

Now for the comment: I am pleased to note in the first place that the great problem has been solved. "Eureka" at last. The question that baffled me has been answered by Comrade Thompson. The I. W. W. is a fact! True, the A. F. of L. is also a fact. So are all the various brands of Socialist, Communist, and reform parties, the Ku Klux Klan, the American Legion, the Knights of Columbus and hundreds of other organizations. I do not remember ever saying that the I. W. W. was not a fact, but if I ever did make any such statement I take it back right now, and if in my articles I have wandered from facts into the realm of myths and "shadows" I sincerely apologize to Comrade Thompson and the I. W. W.

The theory that because members of the I. W. W. have been persecuted by the capitalist class and its hirelings it must therefore be a revolutionary organization, that its position must be correct and that it must be a menace to the continued existence of capitalism, is a theme so much harped upon that we must consider it here at some length, even if we do take up a little extra space. To assume that the capitalist class hirelings never oppress nor persecute the members of any organization except it is an actual menace to the existence of capitalism, is to credit them with intelligence they do not possess. It is well known to Comrade Thompson that the suffragets have been as persistently persecuted as the members of the I. W. W. Does he hold that the suffragist movement ever was a menace to the existence of capitalism? It is also true that in the early days of the Salvation Army its members were persecuted and oppressed; does this prove that the Salvation Army ever was a menace to the existence of capitalism? On the other hand, the hostility of the I. W. W. to the Russian Revolution has been second only to the hostility of the capitalist class itself. And why? Because the Russian Revolution was accomplished by political action, and the Communists who are in control of the situation in Russia are advocates of political action. And yet, the capitalist nations of the world have spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to crush the Russian Revolution. Suppose it had been crushed; does Comrade Thompson think