



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Industrial Workers of the World campaigns for free speech in Spokane, Washington, U.S.A., 1908-1910

Time period notes: *I.W.W. leaders suspended operations in the late spring through late autumn or early winter of each year to allow for maximum participation of migratory workers, who typically would move out of Spokane in warm weather to find agricultural work elsewhere and returned in the fall and winter.*

March

1909

to: March

1911

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Spokane, Washington

Goals:

I.W.W. members and allies fought for the right to speak openly on the streets of Spokane about the exploitative practices of employment agencies.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 177. Speak-in
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 177. Speak-in
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 010. Newspapers and journals

- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 177. Speak-in
- 193. Overloading of administrative systems
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 177. Speak-in
- 193. Overloading of administrative systems
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 037. Singing
- 071. Consumers' boycott
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 177. Speak-in
- 193. Overloading of administrative systems
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 037. Singing
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 160. Reverse trial
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 177. Speak-in
- 193. Overloading of administrative systems
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Notes on Methods:

The I.W.W. was expressly nonviolent in all of its tactics, and made clear to those participating that it would be their most powerful weapon in confronting the Spokane government.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy
Economic Justice
Human Rights

Group characterization:

- casual laborers
- industrial workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Industrial Workers of the World

Partners:

Western Federation of Miners

External allies:

Progressives

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Western Federation of Miners

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Progressives

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 4 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

City government of Spokane, Washington

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Legal actions blocked the I.W.W. from speaking halls to prevent them from having large meetings. (83)

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

There are reports of police beating street speakers, and conditions for prisoners included regular beatings, withholding of food and basic services, and dangerous exposure to the elements among other forms of mistreatment. In all, around 600 protesters were arrested.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The I.W.W. achieved both free speech in Spokane and major concessions from the city government in the regulation of the employment agencies organizers originally came to speak against.

Around the turn of the 20th century, employment agencies, or, as they were known to many workers, “job sharks” had a monopoly on casual laborer in the American West. Industries such as mining and agriculture would contract labor out to an agency, which would “buy out” job applicants and take a sizable cut of what would otherwise have been workers’ wages. Spokane, Washington was a center in the Pacific Northwest for this type of labor, and, thanks to the work of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) and their allies, would also become a symbol for free speech, working class organizing, and the power of nonviolent direct action in the early 20th century American labor movement.

While the I.W.W. local in Spokane represented some 1500 workers in the early 20th century, it was relatively inactive. In the fall of 1908, J.H. Walsh, an organizer with the union, came to Spokane to recruit and train casual, largely itinerant laborers in nonviolent direct action. Walsh also facilitated the construction of a new union hall with an extensive library and seating for several hundred people.

By December of 1908, the I.W.W. in Spokane launched a “Don’t Buy Jobs” campaign against the employment agencies. I.W.W. organizers and rank-and-file would stand on a soapbox, platform, or street corner and speak out against the agencies’ practices, often engaging in exchanges and dialogue with passers-by. Fearing negative publicity, the agencies pressured the city to pass an ordinance banning the speeches, specifically these impromptu street meetings. The union at first complied, however reluctantly, with the ordinance. Workers held meetings in the union hall four times a week, and began to publish *The Industrial Worker*, a weekly magazine featuring issues specific to Spokane’s working class.

In March of 1909, local religious groups, which also relied heavily on street speaking, secured an exemption from the ordinance. This allowed them to apply to the city for a permit and speak publicly, so long as the topics discussed were of a religious nature. The traditionally anti-religious I.W.W. responded by issuing a statement claiming that, even if the exemption did apply to them (it did not), they would not apply for the right to speak on the streets they had built. Shortly thereafter, 150 I.W.W. members and organizers, or Wobblies, consciously went against the ordinance, spoke publicly, and were imprisoned.

One by one, Wobblies were arrested for street speaking. In some cases, there would be as many as six speakers at once, scattered around the town square. When police removed them, often forcibly, there would be six more on standby to take their place. As arrests continued, the Western Federation of Miners, a founding and former member of the I.W.W., called for a boycott of all goods coming out of Spokane.

Given the nature of their work, most casual laborers would move out of Spokane in warmer months to pursue agricultural jobs in other areas. The I.W.W. leadership decided, therefore, to postpone the campaign until the fall when workers returned. In October of 1909, Wobblies resumed speak-ins in high traffic areas. In one famous example, a policeman pulled a speaker off the stage as he read the Declaration of Independence. Within days of the protests’ resumption in October, 400 were jailed, though some estimates place the number as high as 600. The strategy of the I.W.W. was to overload the resources of both the courts and the jails, making it increasingly difficult for the small city to continue arrests.

Spokane jails had had difficulty arresting just 150 activists in March. Now they not only faced massive administrative tie-ups, but Spokane taxpayers were growing increasingly angry as they incurred the mounting costs of the city's courts and jails. As spring grew closer, jails released some of the imprisoned street speakers. As migratory workers left, they hoped that the now-unemployed activists would be drawn, by necessity, to the agencies they were fighting against.

Like they did in 1909, in the summer of 1910 the I.W.W. placed the campaign on hiatus until migratory workers returned in the autumn. October 25, 1910, saw the first Wobbly street speaking arrest of the "season," and the union vowed to send hundreds more. On November 1, a court ruled Spokane's ordinance unconstitutional. In response, the I.W.W. launched a street speaking session that was to last as long as there were members present to replace those arrested. As a result of this action, all of the I.W.W. leaders in Spokane were jailed.

With leadership behind bars, police stormed and closed the I.W.W. union hall on November 3, arresting all members for "criminal conspiracy." In addition to union members, the editorial staff of *The Industrial Worker* and even, by some accounts, the newsboys responsible for handing it out were arrested and held for four months. While imprisoned, Wobblies protested for better conditions through singing, banging their bars in unison, and lecturing guards on class struggle. Unfortunately, prisoners faced frequent mistreatment, including regular beatings and prolonged exposure to the elements. Many sought medical treatment during their time in jail, and there are reports that several died in their cells.

In order to maintain protests, *The Industrial Worker* moved its publication to Seattle, with the I.W.W. moving its operations to nearby Coeur d'Alene City, Idaho, where a number of the protesters had worked at a mine. National I.W.W. organizer Vincent St. John issued a call for all Wobblies and volunteers to go and get arrested in Spokane for the cause of free speech. Hundreds replied, and showed up in Spokane ready to take the place of those in prison.

One such person was Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Arriving in November, 19 and pregnant, Flynn had just weeks earlier helped to win another I.W.W. free speech fight in Missoula, Montana. Active in the labor movement since the age of 15, Flynn was an engaging speaker, and could rally massive crowds with provocative, but accessible rhetoric. Considered by police to be the most active and dangerous of Spokane's Wobblies, Flynn was arrested not long after her arrival, though not before gaining popular support within the town. She was charged with conspiring with another I.W.W. activist, Charley Filigno. The trial became a media spectacle in Spokane, due largely to Flynn's ability to communicate effectively with a crowd, her youth and appearance, as well as her status as an expectant mother. Either before or during the trial, Flynn told the press that jailers were forcing female inmates into prostitution. While these claims were never substantiated, they did draw a number of Progressives to the side of the I.W.W. on moral grounds. On February 24, judge and jury found Filigno guilty, but acquitted Flynn, refusing to convict a "pretty Irish girl."

Further actions of the state would win the I.W.W. more moderate allies. That winter, officials began to confiscate copies of *Industrial Worker*. On February 22, they crossed state lines into Idaho and raided the new I.W.W. headquarters at Coeur D'Alene City. The raid was justified by an outstanding warrant for union leader Fred Heslewood, though the police's actions only provoked further, nonviolent retaliation on the part of the I.W.W. and its allies.

By the end of February, both the union and city officials were feeling the effects of the over yearlong battle. The jails and courts were draining the city's resources, and Spokane's image had been damaged significantly during the Flynn trial. The I.W.W. had begun to exhaust its members and volunteers, and jailed members were growing weary of near-constant abuse. The spring, when casual laborers would again leave the city, was fast approaching. In March, a three-person Wobbly committee met with Spokane's mayor to begin negotiations. By March 3, the two parties came to an agreement that heavily favored the union.

The union hall was returned to the I.W.W., along with the right to assemble in other large speaking venues. They, and anyone else, could hold peaceful assemblies outdoors without police intervention. *The Industrial Worker* was once again permitted to both publish and sell its magazine within city limits, and free speech would be allowed in the streets. Additionally, jailed Wobblies, convicted for violating now-defunct laws, were to be released as soon as possible, though this was not an official ruling and it would take some months before all were released from jail. Aside from free speech, the I.W.W.'s campaign also

won major concessions for labor. The city had begun to reform and regulate the employment agency system, even disbanding the most exploitative of the “job sharks.” The Spokane Free Speech Fight served as an inspiration not only for later I.W.W. Free Speech Fights, but also for other free speech campaigns much later in the century.

Research Notes

Influences:

The I.W.W. ran a similar free speech campaign in Missoula, Montana at roughly the same time as the Spokane campaign. The Missoula campaign, with involvement from Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, was won before Spokane, and provided inspiration to the city's street speakers and I.W.W. members. (1)

Victories in both Spokane and Missoula also gave momentum for further I.W.W. free speech fights with casual laborers throughout the American West, as well as, less directly, free speech fights later in the century. (2)

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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Kate Aronoff, 23/10/2011

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