

The origins of the IWW in Britain: the two Georges



A short account of the activities of the IWW in setting up a section in Britain

During the 1910s in Britain the ideas of the Industrial Workers of the World became increasingly popular in Britain. Apparently two thousand copies per issue of the IWW paper *The Industrial Worker* were sold there in this period. Certainly Guy Bowman and EJB Allen, leading exponents of syndicalism, became increasingly convinced of the need for a separate revolutionary union central as opposed to working in the existing unions.

A conscious decision may have been made to create a section of the IWW in Britain in this period. In 1913 the American IWW orator George H. Swasey (often spelt incorrectly as Swazey) made his appearance in Britain and appears to have gathered like-minded individuals around him. Joe Hill referred to Swasey as “the human phonograph” in one of his letters and certainly he was a compelling speaker. The IWW veteran Richard Brazier, in an interview he gave to Archie Green in 1960 described Swasey as using a duck as a novel prop. He held the duck under his arm whilst soapboxing, proclaiming that rather than keep their beaks shut, workers should join the IWW. He then squeezed the duck causing it to quack, adding that even the duck knew enough to agree. R. M. Fox in his book *Smokey Crusade* describes how he spoke at Hyde Park on Sunday nights, a “dark-haired young man, vibrating with energy, who nearly jumped over the platform in his vehemence”. He taught the audience to sing songs like *Hallelujah I’m a Bum*.

Fox and others chalked the pavements to advertise Swasey speaking on Revolution at the Market in Woolwich. Fox remarked that he “didn’t know much about Socialist theory, but he certainly had an idea of class war”, quoting him as yelling out: “Every inch of fat on the boss’s belly means another wrinkle in yours. Waiters, put oil in their soup! Dish-washers, break their dishes! Stop their machines, put sand in their bearings, put nitric acid on their hops! Shrivell their crops!”

Bonar Thompson in his book *Hyde Park Orator* refers to him as a “good orator”, racy and lively, who beat him in collections and paper sales. He gives evidence that Swasey toured Britain, referring to an incident at Leeds, at a meeting of the unemployed. Here Swasey referred to the department store windows being full of warm clothes and thick boots, whilst his audience were in rags. For this he was arrested for incitement to steal. The trial lasted less

than five minutes, the judge remarking : “ Everybody can see that you are guilty” and then fining Swasey thirty shillings. The fine was quickly paid off by supporters in London, according to Thompson.

Edward Hennem in a letter to Ken Weller describes Swasey as being able to “speak for five hours at a stretch on an open-air platform and could keep an audience convulsed. He was perhaps the most humorous speaker I have ever heard”.

Among the members of the IWW that Swasey gathered around him was Charlie Lahr (see libcom biography). Swasey became the National Organizer of the British IWW. A tour of the British Isles in November and December 1913 by the IWW notable Big Bill Haywood probably also had an effect on the growth of the IWW in Britain. Writing later to Big Bill from internment in 1915, Charlie reminded him that “I am a member of London IWW and used to come with Swasey and other comrades to see you and Jim Larken (sic) at Shaftesbury Hotel”.

Swasey attended the International Syndicalist Congress held at Holborn Town Hall in late September-early October 1913. He could not attend as a delegate of the IWW, as it was crippled by a vicious fight between centralisers and decentralisers at the time. However, he was one of the orators to address the congress with a fiery speech.

Swasey returned to the States later in the 1914, being almost immediately arrested and sentenced to 60 days in the workhouse for use of “immoderate and profane language” during a meeting at Madison Square, New York. It appears he began to address large open air meetings on the subject of birth control on a return tour to Britain in 1919, and spoke many times for Margaret Sanger’s *The Birth Control Review* later the same year in the USA. For this he was convicted for speaking about birth control in front of children. He also produced an 8 page pamphlet *Large or Small Families: Legitimate Forms of Birth-control* in that year produced in Bradford by J.W. Gott of the *Liberator League* (1).

Another IWW organiser to come to Britain in this period was George W. Hardy. The General Executive Board of the IWW decided to send him to Britain in November 1919 and he made a tour of five months through England, Scotland and Wales, speaking on behalf of the IWW prisoners in the USA. He used the offices of Jack Tanner’s paper *Solidarity* at 10 Tudor Street, London EC4 (see libcom bio of Jack Tanner). He spoke at meetings attended by among others, Tom Mann, Robert Smillie and John MacLean and “did a great deal to create an atmosphere of good will toward the IWW” according to an IWW publication.

George Hardy was born in East Yorkshire in 1884, the son of an agricultural labourer. He himself became an agricultural labourer at twelve, later joined the Army and served for 3 years in the Boer war, then working as an unskilled labourer in the Beverly shipyards. He moved to Canada in 1906. Here he joined the Socialist Party of Canada and later the IWW in 1911. At first critical of the Bolsheviks, he changed his mind after a visit to Russia in early 1921. He served as General Secretary -Treasurer of the IWW in that year and the following year he was expelled from the IWW. He was Organising Secretary of the National Minority Movement (British Communist Party union front) in 1924. He was representative of the Comintern in Britain in 1925, and then represented it in South Africa. He wrote an autobiography *Those Stormy Years: Memories of the Fight For Freedom on Five Continents* in 1956. He died in 1966. He is described by Len De Caux in his *Labor Radical* as “chunky, rough in manner, more earthy and convivial than theoretical or spiritual”.

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(1)Swasey was not the only revolutionary who campaigned around birth control. In 1922 Guy Aldred and Rose Witcop were arrested for distributing a pamphlet by Margaret Sanger. Bonar

Thompson appears to have been the only radical who supported himself by selling birth control literature, however!