

The Lost Art of Agitation By Travis Wilkerson

What exactly is agitation, anyway? Agitation is about ideas. An agitator presents one or a few ideas to a mass of people. Slogans, placards, and chants are agitation in its most concise form.

Agitation had its initial roots in the rebellion against British colonialism. But it came of age around the crime of slavery. John Brown's agitation was so forceful that it still resonates today. But the best, the bravest of the agitators were the Wobblies. These were the revolutionary organizers who elevated agitation to an art form.

The Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W. or the "Wobblies") were founded as a revolutionary union in Chicago in 1905. In newspapers, pamphlets, literature, music, graphic art and oration, the Wobblies vision of revolution was equaled by the culture of its agitation. The folk cartoons, which combine savage humor and brave imagery, are the boldest delivery of slogans ever seen in this country. Meanwhile, the slogans themselves are like the whispers of ghosts:

Solidarity forever
Direct action gets the goods.
Labor is entitled to all that it produces
The worst thief is he who steals the playtime of children
What time is it? Time to organize.
Fight for the full product of your labor
The general strike is the key that fits the lock to freedom
Capitalism can't escape the final move
We never forget

Soapbox agitation was the Wobblies true medium. Organizers would travel to the eye of crisis: strikes, workplace disasters, deportations, lockouts, free speech fights. They were precisely what is meant by the term "outside agitator." In a strange town choked by open hostility, police bullying and the constant threat of violence, they would take to the stage (or literal soapbox) and deliver a revolutionary view of things. Without microphones or amplification of any kind, they would address crowds often numbering in the thousands. They would harness bellowing voices punctuated by large, dramatic gestures. Sometimes their words could hold the crowds spellbound. And at their very best, they could make revolutionary ideas a material factor in the struggle.

"Big" Bill Haywood began with a flourish in Chicago. He called the founding convention to order by pounding a two-by-four in place of a gavel before

proclaiming the purpose of “the emancipation of the working class from the slave bondage of capitalism.”

The greatest Wobbly agitators form a kind of pantheon of masters of the lost art. Haywood is joined by the likes of Mother Jones, Eugene Debs, Lucy Parsons, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Carlo Tresca, and Joe Hill. They took the Wobbly vision into factories, mines, and timber & farm fields. Their names are inseparable from the struggles that marked the era: Patterson, Bisbee, the Iron Range, the Great Central Valley.

The most legendary Wobbly agitator is Frank Little. He arrived in Butte, Montana straight from Bisbee, Arizona, where he'd avoided the notorious deportations by being badly injured in a car crash. In Butte he wouldn't be so lucky. He arrived in a city suffocating with anxiety, in the wake of a mining disaster and subsequent wildcat strike. The most powerful corporation in the world dominated Butte: Anaconda.

Little made two public speeches in Butte. He is said to have addressed a number of potentially dangerous matters: the history of the present struggle, strike tactics and strategy. But where he really got into trouble was around the war. He said World War 1 was obviously a war between the bosses and that it was time to turn that war against the bosses.

The scene was incredibly dramatic, with the hobbled Little leaning on his cane. According to accounts, at the summit of his speech the clouds darkened and rain began to fall. He ended with a phrase that strangely echoes the future. He implored the miners to win the strike “by any means necessary.” At 3:00 the next morning, he was lynched by “persons still unknown.”

In the aftermath of World War 1, the Wobblies were targeted by the Federal Government and subjected to sharp repression. A mass trial of the I.W.W. leadership effectively crushed the movement. And so as suddenly as they arrived, the Wobblies disappeared from the political landscape. To a great extent, they took the art of radical agitation with them.

The Wobblies fought for change everywhere, at all times. They always made immediate demands: for better wages or free speech or for the rights of immigrants. But they never lost sight of an image of a different kind of world altogether. Nowadays the Wobblies are regarded, if acknowledged at all, as brave fools. The 400 Billionaires love that position. So do both parties of war. But doesn't it seem obvious that the world is what we make of it?

We need the Wobblies more than ever but instead we have their lessons. The immediate goal is the recovery of radical agitation as an art form. To bring art that

much closer to politics, in order that someday politics might look more like art. The long-term ambition is existentially complex. For truly effective agitation always renders itself obsolete.