

What Is “Wobbly Culture”? — Open Letter to the IWW Organization of Today

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

At the end of July [1997] I begin painting a mural in Centralia, Washington, to commemorate the events of Armistice Day 1919. On that day, members of the American Legion raided the Wobbly offices and met armed resistance. That night, Nathan Wesley Everest, a veteran and IWW member, was lynched by a right-wing mob. The attack was part of a national wave of repression directed against the IWW and other radical organizations.

A committee of activists in the town of Centralia and the surrounding area has formed a broad-based coalition to sponsor the mural. This committee — composed of miners, carpenters, businessmen, retirees, educators, and other community activists — has come under severe criticism from several IWW

are also demanding to be included as a “watchdog” over the mural group.

I cannot answer all of Jess’s charges in this letter, but would like to address myself to his central point. It is true I have appropriated Wobbly culture. I have painted murals about Joe Hill, helped make puppets of Big Bill Hayward, Gurley Flynn, and Carlo Tresca. I have participated in recreations of the Paterson Silk Strike Pageant. I have scrawled the words of Wobbly anthems on murals from Chernobyl, Ukraine, to South-Central Los Angeles. Would the IWW prefer that I not do this?

All culture is appropriated. The images of the IWW themselves come from the groups that preceded them, as well as the popular culture of the day. IWW culture, like all human culture, has deep religious, political, and artistic

antithetical to the aspirations of working people. Does Jess Grant, as a musician member of the IWW, need approval for song lyrics? I doubt it. Workers have nothing to fear from the experimentation of a free and lively art.

At every stage of its historic development the North American working class has created organizations for its defense and advancement. Just like the early Central Labor Councils, Working Men’s Parties, and Knights of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World represented a specific method of struggle for working people. The conditions which gave rise to its birth have changed. Other organizations have arisen and declined.

The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), for example, arose as the response to industrial capitalism in the 1930s and ’40s. I have no interest in romanticizing either the IWW or the CIO. I believe it is important for today’s workers to reclaim elements from all the truly militant moments in the varied history of our struggle. Naturally, I respect those who identify themselves as members of the IWW, since I identify closely with those traditions myself. However, it would be hard to convince me that they have some particular claim to be carrying out the Wob traditions over those who went on to give birth to the CIO, the Communist Party, Trotskyist organizations, AFL-CIO unions, anarchist groups, or a myriad of other formations.

All of us who identify with Wobbly traditions need to find ways to bring those into the class struggle of today. That is what I am trying to do. There is an objective need to combat the capitalism of today. In my opinion, working people need an independent political party to create the space to develop new weapons of struggle. The Labor Party represents that aspiration. As an independent expression of our class, we have every right to lay claim to the militant traditions of the IWW and every

Letter to Washington State Union Newspapers

September 5, 1997

Dear Union Newspaper Editor,

We are one of the many organizations and individuals working on the Centralia Union Mural Project. We would like to inform your membership about and seek support for the labor history mural that will be painted in downtown Centralia, Washington. It is scheduled to be started at the end of September. A public inauguration is being planned for Sunday, November 9, 1997.

The mural will portray a suppressed episode of Washington labor history known as “The Centralia War.” We believe

it is an important part of our history and will help support the resurgence of an active union movement. The enclosed article, [“Fairness Comes Late to Centralia...”; see next page] shows why. We hope that you will print it in the next edition of your newspaper.

In the coming months we will be contacting you about the interests and direction of the Labor Party, the new movement for working people. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at (206) 282-6659.

Thank you.

*Rita Shaw, Co-chair
Labor Party Seattle Chapter*

members in the area. Much of this criticism has been directed against myself. Writing in the *Industrial Worker* of November 1996, Jess Grant attacks me for having “appropriated Wobbly Culture.” The thrust of his criticism is that since I promote the newly formed Labor Party, I cannot use imagery made popular by the IWW. Local IWW members

roots. These images didn’t begin with the IWW, and they won’t end with myself. They belong to all of us, and I encourage all artists to help make them part of the language of our class today.

In a similar vein, I do not believe that any one group has the right to establish themselves as a political commission to oversee the creation of art. This smacks of a censorship which has always been

other class-conscious organization which preceded us.

Of course the Labor Party, like the IWW, has no lock on wisdom. For that reason, I believe a debate on our differing political views would be of benefit to all, and I challenge Jess or any repre-

sentative of the IWW to publicly debate these questions when I arrive in Washington to paint the mural.

In the meantime, it is my intention to have the fullest collaborative relationship with all the members of the mural coalition and the community of Centra-

lia, and I once again extend an invitation to the IWW to join us in making this vision a reality.

In Solidarity,
Mike Alewitz
Artistic Director,
Labor Art & Mural Project

Fairness Comes Late to Centralia Labor History

It is not just recently that labor hasn't gotten a fair shake. In 1919 members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), were intimidated, beaten, thrown out of town, threatened when they later returned, attacked, arrested, one of them lynched, and finally the others sentenced to long prison terms. Maybe a group of Centralia unions, community members, some local business groups and labor history supporters, called the Centralia Union Mural Project can do something to start changing that. The project proposes to create a new outdoor mural in Centralia, Washington, that tells a story.

Up until now this story has mostly been told from the side of the American Legion, which lost four of its members when it attacked the Centralia IWW hall during the Armistice Day parade of 1919. The four legionnaires who died in the attack are memorialized in a statue called *The Sentinel* in Centralia's Washington Park. In a society where the winners write history, labor's unfortunate heroes of "The Centralia War" have never been honored.

In the years and months leading up to the Legionnaires' attack, IWW organizers, known as Wobblies, were active in the Centralia area logging camps, working toward their goal of "one big union." One of the bigger IWW successes came in 1917 with the Northwest lumber strikes. Lumbermen struck for better working and living conditions, but the IWW's class analysis got them branded radicals and communists by the business community and government.

Already in May 1918 the Wobblies had been the targets of violence in Centralia. Their meeting hall was smashed up, and they were beaten and run out of town. In September 1919 they returned

to Centralia to reopen their hall and continue their work. In October a local newspaper urged employers to meet to work up a plan of action against the IWW. The Wobblies, concerned that another attack was in the offing, called on the police chief for protection when they learned that the Armistice Day parade would lead the Legionnaires right past their hall.

No protection was forthcoming and, advised by a local attorney that they were within their rights to protect their property, the Wobblies took up armed positions on the day of the parade in the hall, across the street, and on a nearby hill. As feared, the Legionnaires attacked when the parade reached the hall. Breaking windows and battering down the door, the Legionnaires were met by IWW gunfire, three of the Legionnaires dying in the assault. After regrouping, the Legionnaires captured all of the Wobblies in the hall, except for one who escaped out the back.

Nathan Wesley Everest fled his attackers through the town out to the Skookumchuck River, which he tried to cross. Finding the current too strong, he turned back to face a lone pursuer. The man demanded that Everest drop his revolver and surrender; Everest responded that he would give himself up to the police. The man charged; Everest shot and killed him. Other Legionnaires soon arrived and overpowered Everest. He was beaten as they took him to jail and nearly lynched in broad daylight once they got there.

That night the lights went out all over Centralia. Vigilantes came and took Everest from his jail cell. The police offered no resistance. As he was taken away, Everest said, "Tell the boys I died for my class." The next morning his

body could be seen suspended from the bridge over the Chehalis River. He had been castrated, hanged, and then shot.

No one ever answered for Everest's torture and death. Instead it was the Wobblies who were charged, indicted, and tried. After much legal wrangling and changing of judges, the trial got under way in Montesano. Unbelievably, the prosecutor asked the governor to send troops from Fort Lewis to "protect the jury." Even more unbelievably, the judge allowed this.

In this atmosphere of intimidation, the jury, who later said that they felt that the Wobblies had acted in self-defense, was instructed by the judge to return a verdict of guilty of first-degree murder or second-degree murder. The judge sentenced them to the maximum of 25 years.

It is this story of labor organizing that the Centralia Union Mural project wants to memorialize by financing the creation of a painting by labor muralist Mike Alewitz on a wall of Centralia's Antique Mall. Your support and the support of your union is needed to make possible this homage to the struggles and unity of working people. Now, as always, it is this unity which gives us our strength.

More than half of the nearly \$10,000 needed to complete this project has already been raised. Money will also be needed for the commemoration event in Centralia, to which the public will be invited, and for future mural maintenance. Please consider a contribution of \$250 from your union local or an individual one of \$25. Individual contributions are tax deductible. Make your check payable to: TESC Foundation (Centralia Union Mural Project). Send it to: The Evergreen State College, Labor Education Center, Olympia, WA 98505. For more information call Helen Lee: (360) 866-6000, extension 6326. □