

1917 Raids on the Socialist Party and the IWW

An article in the International Socialist Review from October 1917 about the federal raids on the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World the month before.

The IWW and the Socialist Party

[events of Sept. 5, 1917]

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Simultaneously on September 5th [1917], representatives of the US Government raided the national offices of the Socialist Party and of the IWW, Chicago, and of some 20 branch offices of the IWW in different states.¹ US Marshals armed with search warrants have taken files, records, pamphlets, leaflets, and in many places the entire offices were cleaned out.

Such a wholesale and simultaneous invasion upon the offices of a labor and Socialist organization have never taken place before in the history of this country. The charge has been made that the IWW is a seditious organization and that the IWW and the Socialist Party headquarters are guilty of violating the Espionage Act.

Quote:

From the National Office [Socialist Party].

September 5th a force of federal agents took possession of the National Office. A thorough search of the office was made and later copies of books, leaflets, records, and lists were taken.

This material is to be placed before the grand jury. The charge made against the National Office is that some of the comrades have violated the Espionage Act.

It may have been the intention to conceal the real purpose of this search, but the inference was left that there was no disposition to interfere with the routine work of the party. If the information given us is correct, we will be permitted to continue our regular activities except so far as we interfere with the war program.

We appeal to the members of the party to lay special stress on organization at this time. Every member should enlist as a recruiting officer in order to build up a party machinery so that we can win a sweeping victory in the Congressional elections of 1918.

*[Adolph Germer, Executive Secretary.]*²

Quote:

Statement from the IWW.

Fellow Workers:

At 2:00pm, September 5th, the General Office and Publishing Bureau were raided by the United States authorities.

Government officials have taken for investigation all the correspondence files, books, and ledgers wherein the financial transactions of the General Office are recorded, and the duplicate membership record of the GRU [Grand Recruiting Union] and many of the Industrial unions, that were kept on file in the General Office. Also there was taken samples of all literature published by the organization, and samples of the dues stamps and various

assessment stamps, membership books, report blanks, credentials, and all other supplies pertaining to the work of the organization.

In the Publishing Bureau, none of the machinery was disturbed, but the federal officials requested that proofs be printed of all the papers, cuts, and literature published by the bureau.

From the editorial rooms was taken all the contents of the safe belonging to *Solidarity*, all the books, records, and mailing list of *Solidarity*, and also the mailing list of all the language papers, all bound and unbound files and all the papers.

From this voluminous mass of papers, literature, and records the government will endeavor to sift whatever evidence (if any) they can find to substantiate their charges against the organization, and will present same to the Federal Grand Jury now sitting in Chicago.

We who have nothing to hide, and never have had, have nothing to fear from a fair and square investigation. In fact the General Office, only a few weeks ago, sent an invitation to Justice [J. Harry] Covington, who had been appointed by President Wilson to investigate the IWW, to visit the General Office in Chicago and go over all our records himself, and we assured him of our hearty cooperation in the event he accepted our invitation.

However, while this indiscriminate seizure of the records, files, and property, etc., of the organization, and the fact that the General Office and the Publishing Bureau have been in the possession of federal authorities has handicapped the work of the organization considerably, we are now able to inform the membership that the General Office is open for business, and will fill all orders for supplies and literature promptly and efficiently.

In regard to the publication of our papers, we do not know when we shall be allowed to publish them again, but we think that in the course of a few more days we shall be able to resume the publication of *Solidarity* and the foreign language papers.

In the meantime until the publication of our papers is resumed, we shall endeavor to keep the membership informed through bulletins and letters of whatever events may yet transpire.

We also ask the forbearance of the membership if answers to their correspondence is somewhat delayed, as the main of the General Office, the Publishing Bureau, and of all the papers is tied up in the post office. We expect to secure the release of all our mail in a day or so, and we will lose no time then in replying to the correspondence of one and all.

Until things become normal again, we ask the membership to redouble their efforts to build up the organization to the end that the lot of the workers may be bettered, and their toil-worn existence brightened.

Yours for the OBU [One Big Union],

William D. Haywood,
Secretary-Treasurer IWW.

A copy of the *Industrial Worker*, published at Seattle, reached our desk this morning. It reports that everything movable was removed from the IWW headquarters at that point, but that since there had been no withdrawal of the second class mailing privileges of that paper, the boy proceeding to publish an edition as usual, under great difficulties. Say the *Industrial Worker*:

Quote:

A raid on the offices of the Seattle district of the Lumber Workers IU [Industrial Union] No. 500 and the IWW hall in Seattle was carried out as completely as that on the *Industrial Worker*. Everything that could be used in the work of the organization was taken.

Word from Spokane is to the effect that everything belonging to the organization was taken and that some records in private houses were seized. The supplies were taken there as at most mother place, and those in charge of the offices report that they are about out of supplies to carry on the work.

The raid was carried on very thoroughly at general headquarters in Chicago. Even the private homes of several members of the IWW were entered and searched. The day after the raid of the Minneapolis office of the Agricultural Workers that office issued the following statement:

"According to information, September 5 was the date set for a nationwide search of the files of the Industrial Workers of the World by federal authorities. The purpose of this raid, as near as we are able to learn, was to find out whether the IWW, as an organization, is carrying out propaganda of sedition and anti-militarism.

"There will be no evidence obtained from the IWW that will connect the organization with any such propaganda.

"The federal authorities, acting under instructions from the Department of Justice at Washington, came into headquarters of the AWIU No. 400 in Minneapolis with assistants and US deputy marshals. They made a complete investigation of the files and everything else in the office. The investigation was carried on quietly and with order. they were told when they commenced their investigation they would find no such evidence as they were looking for nor would they find any evidence that the organization was being financed by 'German Gold.'

"When they finished their work, they were pretty well satisfied that their business carried on is legitimate business. There was nothing destroyed or taken from the main office of No. 400 that would in any way interfere with the business of the union.

"Business is going on just the same as it did before the investigation.

"Instead of this investigation hurting the organization, it is my firm opinion that it will result in a great boost. Every delegate should get busy and take advantage of the excitement caused by this investigation. Those who are not carrying credentials and who are eligible to do so, should write in and get them at once. We are herewith producing some telegrams received from various branches:

"Tulsa, Okla.: Federal agents under instructions of US Attorney General's office seized literature, letters, and day book today. No arrests. Hall open for business as usual.

"Omaha, Neb.: Hall raided and everything confiscated by federal officers.

"Great Falls, Mont.: Hall raided and closed by police.

"Spokane, Wash.: All records and papers taken by US Marshals. No arrests.

"[Minneapolis:] The entire effects of the IWW have been gone over in the hopes that something or other would be found that would prove their allegiance to kaiserism. It was undoubtedly hoped that large consignments of gold and other evidences of Germany's control would be discovered.

"The cause of the raid is attributed to the labor troubles of the West. The labor trouble is attributed to German influence. We have a faint suspicion that the Attorney General was searching the wrong house for the attributed cause of the latter.

"We also suspect that he was misinformed as to the ability of the members of the IWW to conduct their business without the aid of leaders.

"Akron, Ohio: Reports all supplies confiscated."

The Socialist National Headquarters.

At the time of the raids made upon IWW headquarters, the federal authorities took charge of the offices of the Socialist national headquarters. The office force was sent home; copies of pamphlets, books, papers, records, files letter copy books, etc., etc., were taken for use in the investigation which has been going on for ten days.

The American Socialist has been permanently denied mailing privileges. We understand that every assistance was given the federal officers both at the IWW and Socialist headquarters. The comrades at the National Office of the party are sending out rallying cries to the Socialists all over the country to get together, to become organizers, and to elect as many Socialists as possible at the coming elections. The *Chicago Tribune*, printing a "tentative slate" between the factions in each party preceding the nominations, and a partisan campaign following, which might end, the leaders on both sides say, in a clean slate of Socialist candidates slipping through in November.

Governor [Joseph] Burnquist of Minnesota has issued orders to every sheriff, with the possible exception, we are informed, of those counties in which Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth are located, to prevent all Socialist meetings. The three cities mentioned are the only ones where it is now possible to hold Socialist meetings.

State Secretary of Minnesota A.L. Sugarman went to Deer Wood to fulfill a speaking engagement. At the depot he was met by half a dozen deputies and the sheriff informed him that he had orders from the Governor to permit no Socialist meetings in that county. The sheriff saw to it that Sugarman got on a train bound for Minneapolis.

A few days later Andrew Hansen went to Greeley to fill a lecture date for the Socialist Party. The sheriff and county attorney declared the meeting could not be held. They offered to pay all of the Socialist expenses and even asked Hansen what "his price" was. The sheriff put Hansen on a train bound for Minneapolis and there was no Socialist meeting.

At Staples the authorities assured the Socialists that a mob had organized to put their Socialist speaker out of business and that they would have to prevent meetings in order to avoid riots.

At Dale where 10,000 people had planned holding a Socialist picnic, a bunch of deputies, sheriffs, rowdies, etc., etc., took possession of the hall and picnic grounds before the Socialists began to arrive.

All persecution and misrepresentation is going to cause the Socialist movement and industrial unionism organization to grow as never before.

1 This estimate is an undercount. A far from exhaustive glance at the contemporary journalism sees mention of raids in at least 26 locales outside of Chicago: Everett, Seattle, Tacoma, and Spokane, Washington; Portland, Oregon; Missoula, Butte, and Great Falls, Montana; Fresno, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, California; Miami, Arizona; Denver Colorado; Salt Lake City, Utah; Minneapolis and Duluth, Minnesota; Omaha, Nebraska; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Milwaukee and Superior, Wisconsin; Detroit, Michigan; Cleveland and Akron, Ohio; Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and New York City. Multiple raids were conducted in many of these cities and at least one news story intimates that there were parallel raids in smaller towns.

2 This same statement was published in the New York Call over Germer's signature.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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