

ARTICLE

FLASHLIGHTS OF THE I.W.W. CONVENTION, 1906.

IV.

“AUTONOMY.”

By DANIEL DE LEON

IT is a significant fact that the slogan “Autonomy!”, to the sound of which the A.F. of L. is drifting on the rocks, should be the identical slogan that went up in this year’s convention of the I.W.W. from the camp of the reactionist minority. The fact is doubly significant. It is significant in that it indicates the mental affiliation between the reactionists in the I.W.W., on the one hand, and the A.F. of L., on the other; and it is significant in that it denotes the vitality that must be latent in the idea of “Autonomy.” When a routed minority of plotters set up a rallying cry, they ever instinctively seek to avoid anything that may betray their purposes; instinctively they seek a fair-looking mask behind which to conceal their face. It is doubly significant that, acting obedient to this instinct, the reactionist minority set up the slogan of “Autonomy!”—a slogan that convicted them as much, as it was sought to speak in their favor. The fact is that “Autonomy” is a word that needs definition; to-day it is bandied about with different meanings. Not the least of the merits of the recent I.W.W. convention is that, at this very formative period of the organization, the convention contributed towards the clarification of {the} term.

Speaking at last year’s convention—the initial gathering of the I.W.W.—Wm. D. Haywood made the following statements:

“I believe that every industry [as distinguished from Departments, which he opposed] should have absolute control, jurisdiction, autonomy, administration, or whatever you please to call it, over their entire membership.”

Another passage proceeds to clarify the term “autonomy” above used:

“I take it that this organization is formed for the purpose of giving to those different international Unions absolute industrial autonomy, to those local Unions LOCAL AUTONOMY, and let every one of the local Unions be installed with the idea of giving to their members as near as they can INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY.”

Already this passage denotes that “autonomy” in the mouth of the Industrialist must be something somewhat different from the same word in the mouth of the craft Unionist. Subsequent passages bring out the fact more clearly and furnish all the necessary elements for the definition of the term. Haywood said:

“To give to the locals administration over their affairs AS LONG AS THEY DO NOT INTERFERE WITH THE INTERESTS OF THE INDUSTRIES; and to give to the industries absolute jurisdiction and administrative autonomy over the interests of the industries AS LONG AS THEY DO NOT INTERFERE WITH THE GENERAL WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT; that, to my mind, is a democratic method of administration.”

Finally, the following passage clarifies the situation luminously:

“Is it possible for the delegates here to consider those different states [the States of the Union] as international industrial unions, to carry into effect the aims and purposes of the general labor movement which are represented by a central government? If there are forty-five different international unions they should have absolute autonomy just the same as the State has from the national government. Every county in the State—I mean every local in an international—should have the same relative position towards its international as the county does toward the State.”

The necessary elements for the definition, or understanding, of the term “autonomy” in Industrialism are amply furnished by the above passages, which are but a few among many others that can be gleaned from the stenographic report of Haywood’s contribution toward the organization of the I.W.W.

The term “autonomy” in Industrialism means no less and no more than the term “home government.” Historic development developed the name. “Home government” is the product of the conflict that raged between two extreme principles of organization, or government. The one extreme is typified by the Roman

Empire, from the center of which all rules emanated, with the result that all its component parts were absolutely subject to it; the other extreme was typified in this country by the Calhoun Nullifiers, who held that their rule was supreme in South Carolina, all Federal laws notwithstanding. Which of the two extremes was the worse, history has left undecided, pronouncing them equally bad. The former crushed individuality, the latter bred the petty tyrant; while the former made great power possible, it did so at the sacrifice of local strength; while the former would promote local strength, it does so at the sacrifice of the totality. In two respects only the two extremes were identical. They both proceeded from the identical source—individual vanity; they both landed in the identical result—the sacrifice of one of the important objects of organized society, to wit, organic unity. Out of the conflict of these two extremes sprang the principle of “home rule”—not as a compromise, but as a recognition, first, of a general sphere to which the locality must be subordinate, and of a local sphere into which the central authority may not trespass. What “home government” is in the political structure of nations, “Autonomy” is in the economic structure of the I.W.W. Seeing, moreover, that the triumph of the I.W.W. implies the overthrow of the political and the substitution of the same with the economic structure of society, “autonomy” will have to be interpreted by the light of the experience that gave birth to the term “home government.” Autonomy, accordingly, is a term to be rejected only when applied to Industrialism in the old Calhoun nullifiers’ sense which, in the end, amounts to the same thing, seeing that both lead to the disruption of that which should be a unit; on the other hand, “autonomy” is a term that must be zealously safeguarded when applied in the sense of respect for internal concerns, without damage to external affairs, or be it the safety of the working class. It is in this latter sense that “autonomy” figures in the organic structure of the I.W.W.

At Chicago the reactionary minority put on the mask of “autonomy,” as understood by the I.W.W., as well as demanded by progress, in order to conceal the “autonomy” which they pursued and which the organic structure of the I.W.W. expressly rejects—the “autonomy” of Calhoun of old, or the A.F. of L. to-day, the “autonomy” which proceeds from self-seeking vanity and which lands in disintegration, in short, the autonomy that spells “corruption.” Where false pretence

must seek asylum in so contradictory a posture, ludicrous sights are inevitable. Nor were such wanting at the convention among the reactionary minority. Two such sights were the most obvious to the well informed gifted with a sense of humor.

One of these sights was presented by the Keoghs, of New York, who need Tammany protection for their craft purposes, and who swear by St. Tammany, moving arrum-in-arrum with caricatures of Anarchists, such as the Dumases and Petriellas, whose craft aims cannot survive in the Industrial atmosphere.

The other sight was that presented by the Mahoneys, McMullens and McDonalds masquerading in the feathers of I.W.W. autonomy while seeking to shield John M. O'Neill, the Editor of the *Miners' Magazine*, from the rebuke administered to him by the convention, for having out-autonomied the A.F. of L. by not only endorsing a political party in distant Pennsylvania in violation of general I.W.W. principle, but also by doing so in violation of the express provisions of his own international Union, the Western Federation of Miners.

At the Chicago convention enlightened "Autonomy" was established both by sober reasoning and by the absurd light into which its opposite was thrown by the reactionary minority.

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