
The Comintern and IWW Bail Reimbursement

[events of Dec. 24, 1920-Jan. 2, 1921]

by Ralph Chaplin

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Dissension in IWW ranks on the subject of communism was growing. Charles Ashleigh, George Hardy, and Harrison George had switched over to the Moscow point of view. Well supplied with funds and literature, they were presenting a strong case for cooperation between the “fighting IWW” and the Communist International. “It’s a demonstration of the international solidarity of labor,” declared Bill [Haywood] with enthusiasm. “It’s out-and-out bribery,” growled General Executive Board [GEB] members at the General Office with alarm. But they accepted the invitation to send an emissary to Moscow for the purpose of finding out if any strings were attached to the liberal “labor defense” donation which had been offered. George Williams eventually made the trip — like everybody else — on a forged passport. His recommendations were unfavorable. Bill was indignant when the GEB backed away from the deal.¹

“The Russian revolution is the greatest event in our lives,” he insisted. “It represents all that we have been dreaming of and fighting for all our lives. It is the dawn of freedom and industrial democracy. If we can’t trust Lenin, we can’t trust anybody.”

“Does that mean you have made your choice?” I asked.

“It means,” replied Bill, “that there is only one choice to make. The world revolution is bigger than the IWW.” That is how Hay-

¹ Williams later wrote a pamphlet summarizing his perspective that was published by the IWW’s publishing bureau entitled “The First Congress of the Red Trades Union International at Moscow, 1921: A Report of the Proceedings by George Williams, Delegate from the IWW.”

wood looked at it. But not the GEB or the IWW rank and file. To them the Communists were “just another bunch of politicians.”

I remember wondering at the time if Bill had already joined the party. Somehow I couldn't imagine him accepting the military discipline of the Comintern and taking orders from some of the upstart “commissars” who were already throwing their weight around in local left wing circles.

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A letter from George Andreytchine reached me. It was post-marked Moscow. George had jumped bail. We had known about it from the beginning.² Bill had been approached with a similar proposition. So had I. The offer was an alluring one. I was to leave the country on a fake passport for Russia, there to devote my life to writing in the interests of the international proletariat. Andreytchine assured me that in Moscow I would be acclaimed as the “poet laureate of the world revolution.” Haywood was to be placed in charge of the Kuznets Basin project and to become Lenin's adviser in organizing the labor front in Russian and the Red International of Labor Unions and International Red Aid. Communist Party officials solemnly pledged that our bondsmen would be reimbursed from Moscow if we would agree.

I told Bill that I wouldn't go through with the plan, but it turned out that his trunk was already packed. He left Chicago secretly. I didn't hear from him again until he reached Moscow. Haywood's first letter, smuggled out through the *cordon sanitaire*, described his introduction to Lenin by Michael Borodin. “I asked Comrade Lenin,” wrote Bill, “if the industries of the Soviet Republics are to be run and administered by the workers.” Lenin's reply was, “Yes, Comrade Haywood, that is communism.” Even that reassuring statement did not enable me to overcome my revulsion against the ideologies of the mill run of American Communists. I was already in disagreement with them at too many points.

² The Macedonian-born George Andreytchine (1894-1950?) had been the editor of the IWW's Bulgarian-language newspaper in Chicago, *Rabotnicheska Misul*. He was swept up in the anti-IWW repression of 1917. Arrested in 1927 and interned in Siberia, Andreytchine managed to survive the Great Terror of 1937-38 in the USSR only to victim to the secret police in Communist Bulgaria ten years later.

Many Wobblies held me responsible for Bill's decision to run out on his bondsmen. I had to do something about it. Inquires about refunding of his bail led me up one blind alley after another. All I got from party officials and visiting "confidential agents" from overseas were promises. I explained to them time and again that the IWW did not have enough in the treasury to make restitution to bondsmen and that William Bross Lloyd and Mary Marcy, who had put up Bill's bond, would not take the loss lying down.³ As Haywood's friend and "adviser," I was in a very tight spot indeed. It put Haywood in a bad light also. A major default of that sort would make raising of further defense funds impossible. Besides, Mary Marcy had been Bill's life-long friend. For these and other reasons I wanted the mess cleaned up.

One day Charles Ashleigh and two party officials invited me to confer with an important "European Comrade" about the matter. I was informed that Moscow had decided to act. The American Communist Party had gone underground. Its first secret convention at Bridgman, Michigan, had been raided by federal agents.⁴ That complicated matters. I was told, however, that Jack Reed was coming to the USA bringing "crown jewels" expropriated from the liquidated Russian nobility and that these were to be turned into cash to reimburse Bill's bondsmen. I was to meet Jack Reed upon his arrival at one of the party's hideouts in the Catskill Mountains, where arrangements would be made to turn the funds over to the IWW. We

³ While William Bross Lloyd (1875-1946), an attorney and son of journalist Henry Demarest Lloyd, was regarded as a "millionaire Socialist" and could absorb the financial loss which resulted when George Andreytchine and Bill Haywood jumped bail. Mary Marcy was less fortunate. Marcy, the strong right hand to Charles H. Kerr at the monthly *International Socialist Review* in Chicago, lost her home to the bail bondsmen. This event was regarded as a contributing factor to her committing suicide in December 1922 at the age of 45. Bill Lloyd, for what it is worth, converted to conservative Republicanism in his later years.

⁴ Chaplin, writing a quarter century after the fact, stumbles here. The "first convention" of which he speaks, which formed the United Communist Party by joining the Communist Labor Party and the Ruthenberg faction of the Communist Party of America, was held at the small resort town of Bridgman, Michigan from May 26-31, 1920 and was conducted without having been discovered by law enforcement authorities. Then in May 1921 this UCP joined with the anti-Ruthenberg majority of the old Communist Party of America to form a new, unified Communist Party of America. It was this unified Communist Party of America, returning to the same Bridgman location for its "second convention" in August 1922 (i.e. after the time of this story) that was sensationally raided by police.

discussed the proposition at the IWW headquarters, and I was advised to take it on.

The trouble was that thus far I had refused to join the party. Actual membership was needed if I were to attend the underground convention.⁵ That meant accepting party discipline and taking orders like any other Communist. I balked at that. They assured me then that the matter of probation and discipline would be waived for the time being. There was considerable rejoicing among local comrades when I finally accepted my card in the [United] Communist Party. Through Charles Ashleigh, who was to accompany me on the trip, I was given a railroad ticket, liberal expense money, and instructions. We were met at the train by a tight-lipped “comrade” of foreign appearance who accompanied us on our journey. In New York City a first-class hotel room had been reserved for us under our party names. Mine was “John Fox.” Another “comrade” took charge of us for a night trip by train up the Hudson. Then came a long ride in a closed automobile to a big farmhouse on a lonely road somewhere in the hills. It was all very mysterious, needlessly so I thought. The feeling of being entangled in a web of international intrigue was far from pleasant. But there was to be more of that sort of thing before I saw the Bolshevik Comintern in its true light.

There were only a couple of dozen delegates at the second underground Communist convention, but they made noise enough for many more.⁶ From early morning until late at night the rambling, dimly lit rooms were full of cigarette smoke, regional, national, and international reports, the reading of theses, and impassioned debate. The walls and window shades were squirming with shadows of profiles and gesticulating arms. I knew nearly all the “comrades” by either name or reputation. The party big shots were all there as well as a bevy

⁵ Since John Reed died in 1920, it is clear that reference here is to the “Special 2nd Convention” of the United Communist Party, held in Kingston, New York over the holidays from Dec. 24, 1920 to Jan. 2, 1921. Reed was indeed dispatched from Moscow late in January 1920 with diamonds destined for the use of the American Communist movement, but these were lost when he was arrested and jailed while attempting to cross the border into Finland. Reed was eventually returned to Soviet Russia where he worked as a functionary of the fledgling Communist International. He made no other attempt to return to the United States, dying in Moscow of typhus on Oct. 17, 1920.

⁶ The Dec. 1920 Kingston convention was actually attended by 42 delegates, 8 representatives of the Central Executive Committee, and a handful of party technical workers used to keep minutes and provide security.

of “confidential agents” from the “Workers’ Fatherland.”⁷ The agenda had been carefully prepared in advance with typical Communist thoroughness. By remaining in almost continuous session, a large volume of business was disposed of with amazing efficiency. Max Shachtman made speeches of incredible length and eloquence in an attempt to prove that his policies did not deviate from the party line. [Alfred] Wagenknecht reported on party finances. Max Bedacht told of progress being made among foreign-language groups. Bob Minor drew pictures of farm animals in ludicrous poses to amuse the farmer’s little daughter during lunch intervals. Caucuses and committees were debating in every room. The walls seemed to vibrate with high-pitched voices. One night I stepped out of the bedlam with Jim Cannon to get a breath of fresh air. We were both fed up with foreign accents and feverish sectional rivalries. The stars were clear and bright. Except for an occasional barking from the huge Great Danes that guarded the place, there was refreshing silence over the countryside. I knew Cannon from the IWW strike at Akron and the old days in the Socialist Party. I felt sure he too was aware of the unsavory overtones.

“How did we get tangled up in a messy thing like this?” he asked me.

“Probably,” I replied, “because some of us have never taken the trouble to think our way through it. We just take it for granted that we are benefiting someone. But whom? Those little men are concentrating on power — power for themselves, their party, their program — power to dominate other men. Is that what the revolution is all about?”

As a matter of courtesy I was placed on a committee to help draw up a resolution protesting the continued incarceration of Tom Mooney. That was my sole contribution, unsatisfactory to everyone including myself. I was becoming impatient. For five days and nights I tried without success to get information about the refunding of Haywood’s bond. The subject had not even been mentioned. Every moment of that time I had been tense awaiting the appearance of Jack Reed and the funds that had been pledged to straighten things out at

⁷ This is undoubtedly a stylistic flourish. Presumably there would have been a representative of the Comintern and perhaps a representative of the Red International of Labor Unions as well. Karlis Janson (Charley Johnson) of the Comintern’s “American Agency” did not arrive back in the United States until later in January 1921.

the IWW general headquarters.⁸ The night before the convention adjourned I was awakened by the Great Danes barking in unison to greet a new arrival. Maybe this was the long-expected courier! I was taken into a private room and informed by one of the “European comrades” that Jack Reed had been arrested in Finland and relieved of the “crown jewels,” which he was attempting to smuggle into the USA. That settled it.

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Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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⁸ Chaplin’s memory is once again playing a trick on him here. John Reed’s death in October 1920 was widely noted in the contemporary left wing press. The Kingston convention which Chaplin attended did not begin until December 24, 1920 — more than two months later.