

Treatment of the IWW

Alfred Tucker



OVERVIEW

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical organization founded in 1905, was particularly strong in the Western states. Opposed to capitalism and suspicious of the state, it favored a society organized into cooperative labor groups. The "Wobblies," as the members were called, fought for their right of "free speech" to present their case directly to working-class people on the city streets. The following is an account—from a 1914 letter—of what happened to a group of men on such a mission in Los Angeles in April 1912.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why might authorities have wanted to prevent the "Wobblies" from exercising their right of free speech?
 - What goal was Tucker trying to achieve?
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In March, 1912, I was living at Victorville, Calif. The I.W.W. then was engaged in a Free Speech Fight in San Diego for the right to speak on the streets. About the 10th of March I went to Los Angeles to see how the fight was coming out. I found it was lagging and no one willing to go. I met several of the free speech committee from San Diego. They were holding meetings and raising money but did not seem to be able to get any men to go to the fight. I talked with all the members around the hall and I found about a dozen men who said they would go if I would. . . . So we went to work and soon had 27 men ready to go. . . . As I had enough money to take myself I was sent two days ahead of the bunch to see how things were. I took passage on the steamer Governor from San Pedro to San Diego. When I arrived there I found the jails of both city and county were full of free speech fighters; also a large bunch had been sent to Riverside and Orange County jails. A committee of some 2,000 small business men, mostly real estate dealers, had been organized for the purpose of running the fighters out of town. As they had no more room for them in jail, the city authorities had prohibited speaking or selling papers anywhere in the city. They would grab men and drag them into an automobile, take them outside of the town, give them a clubbing and threaten their lives if they ever came back. . . . Two days later fellow worker Reisick and the 27 men arrived by boat from Los Angeles, and after resting a day we started to sell papers on the streets. We divided up in threes, two going ahead selling papers, while one stayed behind to watch the action of the police and vigilantes. We had sold quite a few papers before they bothered us. Then they commenced taking the papers away from the boys, arresting some and turning them loose, so we soon ran out of papers. They then confiscated the San Diego Herald and

the San Francisco Bulletins, and would not allow us to sell any papers that gave a fair report of the fight. The next day, being the 22nd of March, at 2 o'clock P.M. 13 of us went out on the corner of 6th and E. Streets to hold a meeting. We started singing a song entitled Casey Jones, the Scab Engineer. We were immediately surrounded by plain clothes men, some of them police and some vigilantes. They arrested the 13 of us and marched us to the police station. We were placed in the court room and our names taken. We asked what charge was placed against us and they told us we would find out. Then they began picking out men from among us and taking them in to another room where, surrounded by police, they were put through the third degree. In the meantime they brought in the rest of the 27 men. None of us had eaten for 24 hours, but they kept us without food until about midnight. Then they divided us and gave us a very severe lecture, telling us if we ever came back they would bury us on some of their beautiful real estate. Then we were ordered to march and they, I suppose returned to their homes feeling they had done a good job. . . .

After resting a day we went to work to get a large bunch of men to go back to San Diego. About this time 50 men from Fresno joined us and we recruited the bunch up to 93 men. About half of the bunch were boys under 21 years of age full of courage and enthusiasm, so we started again for San Diego. We walked out of town to a little station and caught a freight train and rode to Fullerton, when we decided to hold meeting and wait until the next night, which we did. Then we caught a train and rode to Santa Ana, where we stopped over another day and held meetings and tried to visit the 30 men we had in jail there from San Diego, but were unable to do so. That night April the 5th at 11:30 P.M. we boarded another train for the south. Train never stopped for 50 miles. It was then about 1 o'clock A.M. The train slowed down and we were between two lines of something like 400 men armed to the teeth with rifles, pistols and clubs of all kinds. The moon was shining dimly through the clouds and I could see pick handles, axe handles, wagon spokes and every kind of a club imaginable swinging from the wrists of all of them while they also had their rifles leveled at us. The train had stopped on a side track in the foot hills, where the only sign of civilization was a cattle corral, where they loaded cattle for shipment. We were ordered to unload and we refused. Then they closed in around the flat car which we were on and began clubbing and knocking and pulling men off by their heels, so inside of a half hour they had us all off the train and then bruised and bleeding we were lined up and marched into the cattle corral, where they made us hold our hands up and march around in the crowd for more than an hour. They searched us for weapons and not even a pocket knife was found. They searched us several times, now and then picking out a man they thought was a leader and giving him an extra beating. Several men were carried out unconscious and I believe there were some killed, for afterwards there were a lot of our men unaccounted for and never have been heard from since. The vigilantes all wore constable

badges and a white handkerchief around their left arms. They were all drunk and hollering and cursing the rest of the night. In the morning they took us out four or five at a time and marched us up the track to the county line, which is about a mile from the rest, where we were forced to kiss the flag and then run a gauntlet of 106 men, every one of which was striking at us as hard as they could with their pick axe handles. They broke one man's leg, and every one was beaten black and blue, and was bleeding from a dozen wounds. We walked north a few miles for the rest of the bunch. Some managed to ride back to Los Angeles, but the most of us walked all the way back to the city. My feet were swollen so I could hardly walk for two or three weeks. Several other big bunches of men went to the fight after this, but I was unable to go so this ends my experience in Free Speech Fights up to date. If I ever take part in another it will be with machine guns or aerial bombs.

Yours for a better way of fighting and better results as well as our final emancipation from all slavery and tyranny and the building of the world-wide industrial commonwealth.