
Does Conviction Mean Guilt?

An Editorial on the Chicago IWW Trial from *The Milwaukee Leader*, September 3, 1918. †

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The Chicago Tribune and other capitalist papers take it for granted that the IWW members are guilty because they were convicted.

Perhaps they also believe that Jesus Christ was guilty because He was convicted.

Jesus was no doubt given a “fair trial.” His conviction and execution were highly agreeable to the most influential and “respectable” people of that day. These gentlemen were quite certain that the world would wag much more smoothly and satisfactorily on account of the removal of a dangerous agitator, who, like many of the “Wobblies,” had nowhere to lay His head.

But the verdict of history is quite otherwise.

There are many differences of opinion regarding the divinity of Jesus, or the degree of His divinity. There is also a great diversity of opinion concerning the doctrines which have been built up around His name.

But, regardless of all this, we do not know of even one person in the whole world who believes that Jesus was rightfully convicted and executed.

ON the contrary, it is the unanimous opinion of the human race at the present time that He was infinitely superior to his persecutors. It is now the universal belief that His persecutors were the real criminals and that He was guiltless.

May it not be that history will render a similar verdict regarding the IWW members who have just been convicted and sentenced?

It was in reality the principles, not the person, of Jesus that were convicted. He was punished in an effort to destroy His principles.

The principles which He announced were new and unpopular. For this reason it was impossible to secure a fair trial, even though Pontius Pilate may have made every effort to be fair.

The same is true of the “Wobblies.”

It is altogether possible that judge and jury tried hard to be fair.

But it must be remembered that for months preceding the trial, the infamous capitalist newspapers were filled with the most rabid and unreasonable denunciations of these men. They took it for granted that these men were guilty, before they were tried, as well as after. It must also be remembered that for years the same papers have persistently vituperated the IWW.

It would be too much to expect that all this deliberate misrepresentation would fail to have any effect upon the minds of the judge and the men who were selected to act as jurors in the case — unless they had happened to be men who had made an independent investigation of the matter and caught the spirit actuating the defendants.

†- While the editor of *The Milwaukee Leader* was Victor Berger, it is rather unlikely that he was the author of this editorial, the paper generally assigning the writing of such essays to others. Berger published his own “Current Topics” editorial on page 1 of the same edition, as was his custom. The trial in question is the sensational mass trial of 100 member of the IWW, of whom 97 were convicted of acts against the United States and sentenced to a cumulative 1,940 years in Federal prison. The series of draconian sentences were pronounced by Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis on Aug. 30, 1918.

This is amply sufficient to explain the verdict without resorting to the theory that the defendants are guilty.

They stand for principles which would result in real democracy — industrial democracy.

Industrial democracy is utterly antagonistic to those who own and control the capitalist press. So long as these principles are unpopular it is impossible for anyone advocating these principles to secure a fair trial, no matter how sincerely judge and jury may think they are being fair.

This is particularly impossible in a time of widespread hysteria like the present.

Anyone who understands the situation will therefore not in the least conclude that the defendants are guilty just because they were convicted.

You might as well try to make us believe that Rose Pastor Stokes is guilty because she was convicted. Those who are acquainted with her know that she is a white soul, utterly incapable of unworthy action. Conviction by 10,000 juries would not shake this confidence.

The IWWs have in the past done some things which have had a tendency to bias people against them and which, in our opinion, were not for the best interests of the working class.

But that is no reason to believe that they were guilty. We are just as confident of their innocence as we were when they were tried.

There is much speculation as to what effect the conviction of these men will have upon the future of the IWW. Some believe that it will kill that organization. Maybe so. But we hardly think it. Imprisonment usually has quite opposite results. It is entirely possible that, if the IWW is ready to drop its undesirable features, it may have a brilliant future as a labor organization.

Certainly there is abundant room for a real labor organization in the industrial field in this country — one that is loyal to the working class — one that will not barter its principles for a few loaves and fishes — one that understands the ultimate as well as the immediate needs of the workers.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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