

Mob Work: Anarchists in Grand Rapids is a four volume exploration of the history of anarchists in Grand Rapids, Michigan. While a mid-sized town with a reputation for conservative views, below the surface Grand Rapids has a history of radicalism that has largely gone unexplored. Part of that history includes the presence of anarchists active in a number of different ways since the 1880s. Anarchist activity has often connected to what anarchists have been doing in the larger U.S. context and as such this history situates Grand Rapids anarchists in larger national trends.

In this second volume of *Mob Work*, topics include Emma Goldman's several successful visits to Grand Rapids, the story of the William Buwalda, a former soldier who became an anarchist organizer, and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). During the 1910s, there were at least two IWW locals active at various points, participating in the Furniture Strike of 1911, attempting to unionize garbage workers, and actively promoting an anti-capitalist and anti-electoral views.



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MOB WORK

ANARCHISTS IN GRAND RAPIDS, VOL. 2



*Anarchism is not, as some may suppose,
a theory of the future to be realized
through divine inspiration. It is a living
force in the affairs of our life, constantly
creating new conditions.*

*—Emma Goldman, "Anarchism:
What It Really Stands For"*



Anarchism and anarchy mean different things to different people and have meanings that differ depending on their context. Anarchism has a rich theoretical and historical tradition. For the most part, this publication assumes the reader has at least a basic understanding of anarchism. However, for those never exposed to the ideas, the following excerpt from Peter Gelderloos' *Anarchy Works* identifies the basic concepts in anarchism:

Autonomy and Horizontality: All people deserve the freedom to define and organize themselves on their own terms. Decision-making structures should be horizontal rather than vertical, so no one dominates anyone else; they should foster power to act freely rather than power over others. Anarchism opposes all coercive hierarchies, including capitalism, the state, white supremacy, and patriarchy.

Mutual Aid: People should help one another voluntarily; bonds of solidarity and generosity form a stronger social glue than the fear inspired by laws, borders, prisons, and armies. Mutual aid is neither a form of charity nor of zero-sum exchange; both giver and receiver are equal and interchangeable. Since neither holds power over the other, they increase their collective power by creating opportunities to work together.

Voluntary Association: People should be free to cooperate with whomever they want, however they see fit; likewise, they should be free to refuse any relationship or arrangement they do not judge to be in their interest. Everyone should be able to move freely, both physically and socially. Anarchists oppose borders of all kinds and involuntary categorization by citizenship, gender, or race.

Direct Action: It is more empowering and effective to accomplish goals directly than to rely on authorities or representatives. Free people do not request the changes they want to see in the world; they make those changes.

Throughout this publication, we explore various facets of anarchist history as it relates to Grand Rapids, Michigan and try to situate it within its larger historical context. The purpose is not to make a case for anarchy—that has been made better elsewhere by others far more eloquent than us.

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HENDRIK MEIJER

Hendrik Meijer was the founder of Meijer, the ubiquitous West Michigan grocery chain that started from a single storefront in Greenville, Michigan to become a multi-million dollar company. The Dutch immigrant Meijer worked long hours and made many sacrifices, eventually succeeding in the grocery business. It's the kind of "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" story of capitalist success that Americans love to tell.

However, there's an interesting part of the story that many do not know: Hendrik Meijer was an anarchist who disdained organized religion, hated capitalism, and—at least for a time—participated in the Dutch anarchist movement in the Netherlands and here in West Michigan. It's a story worth sharing because it challenges the dominant narrative that all Dutch immigrants came from conservative religious backgrounds and shows that there were a variety of anarchists active in the West Michigan area.

An Anarchist in the Old World...

Hendrik Meijer was exposed to anarchist and socialist views while living in the Netherlands. His father worked in the newly industrialized economy, often under miserable conditions in the city of Hengelo's mills. Workers were routinely exposed to anarchist views, particularly those of Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis.¹ Nieuwenhuis was a former preacher who rejected the Church for socialism and eventually came to anarchism.² He became an important force in the Dutch anarchist movement, publishing a newspaper called *The Free Socialist* and working tirelessly to build up the anarchist movement. He explained his conversion from socialism writing:

“From a socialist, I became an anarchist, because I saw that socialism promoted unilaterally only half of the liberation of man, by his most to ensure that he would suffer no starvation, but the man did not spiritually free, there he suffered to remain under the authority of any kind. Therefore: bread and freedom - that must be the watchword and that it is Anarchism”³

Nieuwenhuis advocated for “free combative organisations” that would fight for a world based on free federated associations. He also militantly attacked religion.⁴ In the Netherlands, anarchists like Nieuwenhuis split from the socialists and created one of the country's largest trade unions based on anarcho-syndicalism.⁵

This was the anarchism of Hendrik Meijer. Meijer served in the military—largely to avoid work in the factories—and distributed anarchist pamphlets and put up

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posters criticizing Dutch colonialism.⁶ After leaving the military, he met and fell in love with Gezina Mantel who was the daughter of prominent socialists and well-known organizers in Hengelo. Gezina Mantel was a radical in her parents’ mold, actively participating in the movement by attending anarchist lectures, participating in a socialist choir, and directing socialist plays.⁷ Their family had abandoned the church and decided that religion was hypocritical, embracing the views of Nieuwenhuis.⁸ They were pacifists who didn’t drink, didn’t eat meat, and advocated for access to abortion and birth control.⁹ They contributed actively to the anarchist movement, opening a socialist hall and regularly contributing to the movement’s publications and debates.¹⁰ In their home, their mantel featured portraits of Peter Kropotkin and Francisco Ferrer, alongside a plaque reading, “Everything must go that debases mankind: the state, the Church, and the extortionists.”¹¹



Ferdinand Domela
Nieuwenhuis

...Trying to be an Anarchist in Holland

After immigrating to the United States, Hendrik Meijer moved to Holland, Michigan. Holland had been settled by conservative Dutch immigrants who had seceded from the Dutch Reformed Church, outraged over what they perceived as a more liberal direction being taken by the Church.¹² It was a conservative community with businesses closed on Sundays, regular church attendance expected, and pride in both Old Dutch traditions and the United States. A Holland newspaper from around the time of Meijer’s arrival wrote, “We will not accept socialism, with its unworkable demands! Still less anarchism, with its wild dreams and demonic tools!”¹³

Despite an environment hostile to radical views, Meijer involved himself in the socialist community that existed. He joined a socialist group within a few weeks of immigrating.¹⁴ Through that group, he met three anarchists like himself who formed their own group and set to work producing anarchist pamphlets. Despite its conservative nature, their group regularly had as many as 12-15 people in attendance and socialist speakers often passed through Holland.¹⁵ The group held its meetings on Sundays—a perhaps deliberate affront to the majority of Hollanders who believed in attending church and doing no work on Sundays.¹⁶ The group may have been called the “Modern Sons of Marx” although his biographer is unsure. During this period he also organized a memorial in Holland on the Haymarket anniversary¹⁷ and tried to get involved with a socialist newspaper.¹⁸ Letters from him describing the Dutch immigrant experience in West Michigan were also published in *Recht door Zee*, a Dutch anarchist newspaper.¹⁹ When Hendrik Meijer’s partner Gezina Mantel finally came to the U.S., the couple specifically chose to get married on November 11, 1912—the anniversary of the

executions of the Haymarket anarchists.²⁰

The Capitalist Years and the Shift Away from Anarchism

While Hendrik Meijer wrote articles critical of the United States in *Recht door Zee*, he was at the same time cautiously optimistic about the the United States.²¹ This optimism expressed itself in his desire to gain independence and not work for a boss—a desirable goal for many—but one that would eventually lead to his becoming a capitalist owner, like those he disdained in his youth.²² He started as a barber (and eventual owner of a barbershop) before opening a grocery store in 1934 during the Depression.²³

According to his biography, Hendrik Meijer’s politics began to shift. In 1912, he expressed cynicism and disappointment over people’s political participation.²⁴ Around this time, he began to participate less directly in radical politics: he didn’t get involved with the socialists in Greenville and stopped writing for the Dutch anarchist press.²⁵ Meijer also declined to participate in the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) despite having a friend in the organization and what should have been natural political affinities.²⁶

Over time, his grandson—and biographer—Hank Meijer wrote that Hendrik (and presumably Gezina’s) views became less “dogmatic”.²⁷ While Hendrik Meijer shied away from active political participation, their living room was still decorated with portraits and quotes by their revolutionary heroes. For her 29th birthday, Gezina Meijer received Nieuwenhuis’ book of four short biographies of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Robert Owen, and the Reformation martyr Michael Servetus.²⁸ Still, he could speak out at times, opposing World War I in *Recht door Zee* and specifically questioning the propaganda being published in U.S. newspapers.²⁹ Several years later, he criticized both the communism of Stalin and the fascism of Hitler as being two routes to the same end—expressing a sort of anarchist critique.³⁰ In the 1950s, he also spoke out against the Red-baiting tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy, even in unfriendly settings like the Greenville Rotary Club.³¹

The radicalism of the Meijer household to some degree brushed off on his children. Hendrik Meijer’s son—Fred Meijer—recalls learning about anarchists in school. Owing to his parents influence, he was able to correct the teacher who said that anarchists were simply “lawless hooligans who threw bombs, shot innocent people, and burned down buildings.” He recalls saying that “anarchists are peace-loving people who don’t like unjust governments and who try to bring them down.”³² Hendrik Meijer’s daughter Johanna would eventually quit Meijer and became active in the areas of civil rights and arms control.

However, by the time Hendrik Meijer opened his first grocery store, his anarchist views seemed to be replaced by capitalist views. Meijer quickly expanded his

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store multiple times, gaining a reputation for undercutting other grocery stores and competing fiercely over price.³³ By the time Meijer stores unionized in 1951, Meijer was hostile to unions, understanding that they made things difficult for the owners.³⁴ There was nothing radical, anarchist, or egalitarian about Meijer stores. They were a retail business that was—at least through its ground-breaking combination of food and general merchandise sales—at the forefront of the suburbanization and standardization of American society.

The older Meijers' politics occasionally show up in the news (Hendrik Meijer was recently described as an anarchist and Gezina Meijer a Stalinist).³⁵ But for the most part, it's a forgotten story and their views are seen as quaint relics of "the Old World" that needed to be overcome. Moreover, while the elder Meijers had radical politics in their younger years, they were abandoned over time as Hendrik Meijer became a small (and later large) business owner. Perhaps we should read the story as a cautionary tale, a warning about what happens when one tries to mix radical views with capitalist social relations—it's usually the capitalist values that win out.

EMMA GOLDMAN

Emma Goldman is one of the most well-known anarchists in the United States. Both during her life and in her death, Goldman was notorious for her advocacy of anarchism, free love, hostility to religion, birth control, violent revolution, and struggle against patriarchy. She was known as a prolific author and lecturer and was involved in many of the prominent anarchist projects undertaken during her life. She immigrated to the United States in 1885 and became an anarchist following Haymarket. During her years in the United States, anarchist ideas grew in popularity and expanded in new directions from 1890 to 1917. Moreover, changes in her views, from advocacy of assassination, adherence to Johann Most's ideas, advocacy of anarchist-communism, and involvement in artistic circles, reflected larger trends in the anarchist space. As a lifelong target of government repression, Goldman was among the hundreds of anarchists deported to Russia following World War I where she became an early critic of Bolshevism and the Soviet state. She was only allowed to return to the United States once in 1934 for a lecture tour.

Emma Goldman spoke regularly across the country and spent months at a time on the road. Her lecture tours allowed her to raise money to support anarchist projects (such as her publication *Mother Earth*), to support anarchist prisoners, and to connect with the nationwide anarchist network. Goldman was regarded as a powerful speaker, with her power largely coming from her willingness to discuss

controversial subjects in a frank and clear manner.³⁶ Her style of speech—deliberately connecting with the audience and including her own experiences, made her a speaker of renown.³⁷

A description of Emma Goldman by biographer Candace Falk described her lecture style:

“By 1900, Goldman had developed a distinctive style of lecturing—a quick humorous quip about the police, or current politics, or even about the person who introduced her, followed by a sweeping talk linked to contemporary issues that displayed her signature political and cultural critique of hypocrisy. Her intention was always to reach a varied audience through reason and emotion, always ending her talks with a rousing articulation of a vision of hope for a better world within reach. Energetic and easily able to create a rapport with her listeners, she became a performance artist in the service of the cause of anarchism—attracting many to the spectacle of her inimitable form of political theater... After her formal lecture, during the question period, her biting wit often left the audience in stitches.”³⁸



Emma Goldman Circa 1915-1916

Both her narrative power and her notoriety made her a popular speaker that appealed not just to anarchists and working-class radicals, but a wide-variety of professional debating societies, small-town theater-goers, and more.³⁹ Emma Goldman’s appeal reached beyond anarchist circles, with Goldman gaining influence in the Bohemian/counter-cultural arts communities that sprung up across the United States. During the 1910s when she visited Grand Rapids, Goldman’s popularity increased significantly and she was able to take advantage of general spirit of reform that dominated the era.⁴⁰ However, most of these people celebrated her as an individual and for her non-conformity, rather than her anarchism.⁴¹

Still, Emma Goldman was an anarchist and her choice of speaking locations can be seen as reflective of the strength of the anarchist space in the places where she visited. She went to those places where there were anarchists to organize and attend her talks.⁴² These anarchists—sometimes known and in other cases unknown—organized appearances for her year after year. Moreover, her repeat visits to places like Grand Rapids suggest that anarchism continued to have a stronghold in the Midwest into the 1910s.⁴³

60 “Public Forum Will Bar Emma Goldman,” *The Grand Rapids Press*, May 26, 1917, 5.

61 “You Can Really Understand Why Emma Goldman...,” *The Grand Rapids Press*, May 25, 1917, 6.

62 “Public Forum Decides Against Emma Goldman,” *The Grand Rapids Press*, May 29, 1917, 5.

63 “Mother Earth Subscribers,” *Light and Shadows: Emma Goldman 1910-1916*, Accessed November 7, 2013, <http://metadata.berkeley.edu/emma/>

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65 “Contributions to M.E. and M.E. Special Edition,” *Mother Earth*, Vol. X, No. 3, May 1915, 128.

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71 Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, Vol. 1, 428.

72 Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, Vol. 1, 428.

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74 “Directory of Individuals – William Buwalda,” in Candace Falk, ed., *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years, Making Speech Free, 1902-1909*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 513.

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77 Candace Falk, “Raising Her Voices: An Introduction” in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years, Making Speech Free*, 51.

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79 “George B. Davis to William Howard Taft,” 330.

80 “Now in Guard House,” *Grand Rapids Press*, May 4, 1907, 3.

81 “May Be Grand Haven Man,” *Grand Rapids Press*, May, 8, 1907, 5.

82 “George B. Davis to William Howard Taft”, 330.

83 “George B. Davis to William Howard Taft”, 331.

84 “George B. Davis to William Howard Taft”, 331.

85 “Frederick Funston to Fred C. Ainsworth” in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years, Making Speech Free*, 335.

86 Emma Goldman, “Essay in the New York World,” in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years, Making Speech Free*, 343.

87 “To The Judge Advocate General Of The Army,” in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years, Making Speech Free*, 337.

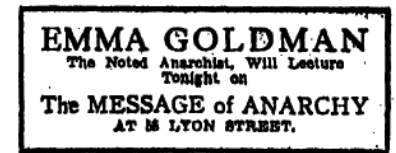
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- 31 Meijer, 196.
- 32 Smith & ten Harmsel, 9.
- 33 Meijer, 155.
- 34 Meijer, 203.
- 35 Pat Shellenbarger, “His name’s on the store – but he leaves much more on the landscape of Michigan,” *Crain’s Detroit Business*, November 30, 2011, <http://www.crainsdetroit.com/article/20111130/FREE/111139987/his-name-s-on-the-store-but-he-leaves-much-more-on-the-landscape-of-michigan>
- 36 Kissack, 138.
- 37 Vivian Gornick, *Emma Goldman: Revolution as a Way of Life*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 67.
- 38 Ferguson, 96.
- 39 Gornick, 70.
- 40 “Into the Spotlight: An Introductory Essay,” in Candace Falk et al., eds., *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years, Volume Three: Light and Shadows, 1910-1916*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 513.
- 41 Marsh, 105.
- 42 Ferguson, 212.
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- 46 “Emma Goldman Here,” *Grand Rapids Press*, February 6, 1911, 11.
- 47 “Tells of Anarchy,” *Grand Rapids Press*, February 8, 1911, 9.
- 48 “Hundreds Hear Emma Goldman,” *Grand Rapids Herald*, February 8, 1911, 1.
- 49 “‘The Red Woman’ Talks on Suffrage Question; Modest, Quiet Womanly Soul Makes Points,” *Grand Rapids Herald*, Feb. 7, 1911, 1.
- 50 “Will Lecture Here,” *Grand Rapids Press*, March 13, 1912, 13.
- 51 “Give Lecture Again,” *Grand Rapids Press*, March 14, 1912, 14.
- 52 “Emma Goldman The Noted Anarchist...,” *The Evening Press*, February 7 1911, 1 and “Emma Goldman The Noted Anarchist...,” *The Evening Press*, March 14, 1912, 1.
- 53 “Emma Goldman Ad,” *The Grand Rapids Press*, November 24 and 25, 1914.
- 54 “Emma Goldman: Chronology: 1901-1919,” *Emma Goldman: A Guide To Her Life and Documentary Sources*, Accessed November 7, 2013, <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/goldman/Guide/chronology0119.html>
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- 57 Disgusted, “Emma Goldman’s Address Condemned as Immoral,” *Grand Rapids Press*, November 30, 1914, 6.
- 58 Plain Talk, “Defends Emma Goldman’s Lectures and Says Throwing Stones at Her Will Not Solve Social Problems,” *Grand Rapids Press*, December 5, 1914, 4.
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Emma Goldman in Grand Rapids in 1911 and 1912

In the 1910s, Emma Goldman visited Grand Rapids on three separate occasions. The first time was on February 6 and 7, 1911—which she added to her lecture tour along with an appearance in Jackson.⁴⁴ In all of her visits, Emma Goldman always had positive things to say about Grand Rapids. The stops were generally arranged by anarchists William Buwalda and Charles W. Bergman.

By the time she was appearing in Grand Rapids, Emma Goldman’s reputation was notorious. In 1911, *The Evening Press* reported that the “Queen of the Anarchists” (a media given title that dated back to the 1890s⁴⁵) was in Grand Rapids and mentioned her arrest record for “inciting a riot and for preaching the doctrines of social revolution.”⁴⁶ According to reports newspapers and by her account in *Mother Earth*, the Grand Rapids lecture went well. *The Evening Press* reported that Goldman lectured “to a good sized crowd” and that she was a “forceful speaker with good delivery.”⁴⁷ The *Grand Rapids Herald* boldly stated in their headline that “Hundreds Hear Emma Goldman.”⁴⁸ The *Herald* described a crowd that was a mix of “adherents to anarchy” and those that came out of “idle curiosity” (in contrast to *The Evening Press* which was skeptical about there being any actual anarchists in attendance). The newspaper went on to describe Emma Goldman as having a “force of magnetism [that] is considerable, while her diction and delivery are something to marvel at.” The paper said that her “Anarchism: What It Really Stands For” talk avoided any discussion of “violence, murder bloodshed or bomb-throwing” and instead defined anarchism as “the philosophy of a new social order based on liberty unrestricted by man-made law; the theory that all forms of government rest on violence and are therefore wrong and harmful as well as unnecessary.”



Emma Goldman Ad from 1911

The day before their relatively positive report on Emma Goldman’s lecture, the *Grand Rapids Herald* wrote an absurdly condescending profile of Emma Goldman.⁴⁹ The reporter was clearly expecting to encounter the fire-breathing, bomb-throwing anarchist of media and government portrayals, opening the article with: “To the professional interviewer there is nothing so discouraging as the organized and instinctive refusal of the ‘famous women of our times’ to ‘act up’ when interviewed.” The author was clearly taken aback when Emma Goldman—who had no advance notice of the visit—offered to make the reporter a cup of coffee. The reporter described it as “maddening” that when they were so nervous (“hands clenched; courage screwed to the top notch”) about meeting “the most dangerous anarchist of them all” that she would be so hospitable. The

author described all of her comments as being underlain by the “courage of her convictions” and a general attitude of “no compromise.”

The interview largely focused on women’s suffrage which had recently suffered a setback in Michigan. Emma Goldman’s comments on suffrage were consistent with her views about patriarchy and the limits of electoral politics. She said:

“It is absurd to go cringing down to Lansing and ask men to please give women the right to vote. Men will never do anything for women which will better their condition because it is not their desire that they have better conditions.”

Goldman dismissed voting:

“It is to laugh when men say women have not intelligence enough to vote. It does not require any, and none of the men exercise any.

Voting, my dear, requires neither intelligence, culture nor character. If you do not believe me, look over your list of politicians.”

Goldman said that while she is sympathetic to the goals of the suffrage movement, she makes no effort to support the movement:

“I am a suffragist, but I do nothing to assist the cause because I do not think the ballot will give woman anything which she has not already, or anything which her intelligence, determination and integrity does not enable her to secure. As I said before, if she wants the ballot badly enough, she will take it. She will not ask a lot of men if she please may have it.”

When Goldman lectured again in Grand Rapids in 1912, her talks received less attention. They were announced in *The Evening Press*⁵⁰ but there was no substantive report. Instead, the newspaper just said that she repeated the same lecture on anarchism.⁵¹ In both 1911 and 1912, advertisements for the lectures appeared on the front page of *The Evening Press*.⁵²

Emma Goldman’s 1914 Visit

In 1914, Emma Goldman once again spoke in Grand Rapids. She delivered two lectures on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, sponsored by the Analyzer’s Club. The lectures took place at the Carpenter’s District Council Hall located at the corner of Division and Oakes and were advertised for two days prior with front page advertisements in *The Grand Rapids Press*.⁵³ Goldman’s lecture topic was “The War and Our Lord.”⁵⁴

ENDNOTES

Note: The endnotes continue from the previous volumes of this history, so shorthand references may refer to a previously cited work.

1 Hendrik G. Meijer, *Thrifty Years: The Life of Hendrik Meijer*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 6.

2 Meijer, 13.

3 “Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis Museum.” Accessed November 7, 2013. http://www.fdnmuseum.nl/docs/HetLevenVanDomela_FDNmuseum_2009.pdf

4 Gerhard Rijners, “F. Domela Nieuwenhuis,” in *MAN!*, 535.

5 George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1962), 437.

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7 Meijer, 48.

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19 Meijer, 46.

20 Meijer, 93.

21 Bill Smith & Larry ten Harmsel, *Fred Meijer: Stories of His Life*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 4.

22 Meijer, 74.

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“...wages, benefits and working conditions” was typical of those signed during the period.²⁶⁸ The contract between the Easttown Community Association and the IWW was different than most labor contracts in that it professed to come from a place of mutual understanding of “similar ideas and methods” defined as “democratic grass-roots control, direct action tactics and the commitment to organization and education.”²⁶⁹ The contract set out basic provisions for working conditions and outlined a structure of co-operative decision-making where employees had an “equal voice and vote in running the shop.”²⁷⁰ The IWW represented workers for several years until all of the workers in the co-operative found private sector jobs.²⁷¹

Into The 2000s

In 1999, the union once again returned. Historian Michael Johnston—himself a member of the IWW—wrote that the IWW returned in 1999 and marched in the 2000 Labor Day parade in Grand Rapids.²⁷² The IWW in Grand Rapids has remained active since 1999, meeting regularly throughout the 2000s²⁷³ and eventually gaining national attention for its role in nationwide campaign to organize Starbucks workers.²⁷⁴

There was no newspaper coverage of the two lectures. Goldman wrote that the two lectures were “the most exciting and interesting experience” of her lecture tour, mentioning that the talks were nearly disrupted by a group of Catholic students who were upset at her criticism of religion.⁵⁵ Her appearance resulted in three letters to the “Public Pulse” column in *The Grand Rapids Press*, suggesting that it was to some degree controversial and a topic of conversation in the town. One letter denounced her lecture as “blasphemous” taking particular issue with the way in which people applauded her wish that if God existed that he commit suicide.⁵⁶ Another letter said that Goldman’s discussion of marriage and a woman’s right to choose with whom to bear children and when (without regard to marriage) was “immoral” and that her comments resulted in the police being called.⁵⁷ A final letter on the lectures appeared on December 5, 1914 that provided a less sensationalized account of her lecture.⁵⁸ The writer described the topic of Goldman’s lecture as an exploration of how Christians were supporting World War I and the role in which the three pillars Christianity, militarism, and capitalism were playing in paving the way for future U.S. involvement in World War I.

Once again, William Buwalda was involved in organizing the lectures and indeed was asked to coordinate the event by Goldman, although there was a financial backer for the visit who wished to remain in the background according to a letter from Emma Goldman.⁵⁹

A Possible Visit in 1917 Meets with Opposition

In 1917, it seemed likely that Emma Goldman would once again speak in Grand Rapids. In May of that year, word began to appear in *The Grand Rapids Press* that Emma Goldman might lecture at the behest of the Public Forum. The Public Forum was a group that organized a variety of lectures and speakers on many different topics guided by the belief—according to *The Grand Rapids Press*—that “the democracy of discussion is essential to the democracy of government.”⁶⁰ However, it seems that almost as soon as the possibility became known, the group withdrew her name from consideration. As was typically the case with anarchists, *The Grand Rapids Press* turned the possibility of her speaking in town into a joke (saying that if she spoke at City Hall her “scolding” would sound just like the old common council).⁶¹ It was officially announced that Goldman would not be coming when a member of the Public Forum’s executive committee made a successful motion to bar her appearance.⁶²

Odds and Ends

Aside from her visits to Grand Rapids—and especially her friendship with William Buwalda—Goldman also drew further support from Grand Rapids. Her publication *Mother Earth* had at least a few subscribers from Grand Rapids⁶³, including a



Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth*

subscription by the Grand Rapids Public Library.⁶⁴ A donor from Grand Rapids also contributed \$15 to keep *Mother Earth* going in 1915.⁶⁵ During the 1910s, *Mother Earth* was an important anarchist publication and a force in the larger radical left.⁶⁶ The publication was non-sectarian in nature and published a wide-range of anarchists as well as “socialists, single-taxers, militant Wobblies, social reformers, and even parlor liberals.”⁶⁷ Among the anarchists published were Alexander Berkman, Voltairine de Cleyre, Errico Malatesta, and Peter Kropotkin. The publication was paid in part by lecture tours where she visited cities like Grand Rapids, gaining financial support from anarchists and curious outsiders alike.

WILLIAM BUWALDA

By 1908, Emma Goldman was well-established as prominent anarchist speaker. Her talks were so popular that they seemed to demand larger and larger halls. They also attracted an ever increasing amount of repression. Writing about her time in San Francisco in 1908, Goldman said:

“My meetings were veritable battle encampments. For blocks the streets were lined with police in autos, on horseback, and on foot. Inside the hall were heavy police guards, the platform surrounded by officers.”⁶⁸

However, rather than bow to the repression, Goldman pressed on and large crowds eagerly waited hours to hear her, and 5,000-person halls were too small.⁶⁹

On April 26, 1908, Goldman delivered a lecture that exposed the audience—whom she said received it enthusiastically—to a critique of patriotism. Goldman spoke for over an hour, analyzing “the origin, nature, and meaning of patriotism, and its terrific cost to every country.”⁷⁰ Following her lecture, people lined up to shake her hand—including a uniformed soldier from West Michigan named William Buwalda. Goldman reached for Buwalda’s hand, and almost before she realized what she was doing “...pandemonium broke loose. People threw their

The union didn’t give up its agitation and it was one of the few during the war to keep up an aggressive campaign of strikes. Consequently, its efforts at avoid repression proved futile.

On September 5, 1917, the government raided IWW headquarters, locals, and residences across the United States—some sixty-four headquarters in all were targeted. Literature, organizational records, and correspondence were seized and used to develop legal cases against IWW members.²⁵⁵ The government’s efforts were far reaching; pre-war activities and writings as well as general union activities (such as strikes) were used as evidence of the IWW’s alleged desire to interfere with the conduct of the war.²⁵⁶ IWW literature and correspondence was aggressively targeted under anti-radical postal restrictions, which not only hampered the organization’s agitation but also made it increasingly difficult to coordinate a defense campaign for its imprisoned members.²⁵⁷

The IWW was largely alone in fighting this repression. Liberals and civil liberties organizations were unwilling to contribute to the IWW’s defense.²⁵⁸ Moreover, other sectors of organized labor actively cooperated with the government against radicals. For example, American Federation of Labor (AFL) head Samuel Gompers was willing to identify IWW members, anarchists, and other radicals for the government.²⁵⁹

A Return: The I.W.W. Comes Back

In the late 1970s, the IWW—long absent from Grand Rapids—returned when the union organized and successfully won a contract at Eastown Printing Co.²⁶⁰

By the early 1960s, the IWW had nearly gone extinct—its membership dropped to as few as 115 members.²⁶¹ However, widespread protest and resistance grew during the 1960s, and the IWW rebounded. Its history of radicalism and direct action appealed to some 1960s militants and especially after 1968, students began to join the IWW and campus groups proliferated.²⁶² This also ushered in a demographic shift in the IWW; by the early 1970s most of its members were under thirty.²⁶³ As union members graduated and/or moved out of the university setting, on-the-job organizing by the IWW increased. Due to its relatively small size, the union focused primarily on small shops and factories by connecting with young militant workers.²⁶⁴

It is in this context that the effort to organize Eastown Printing Co. was undertaken. The IWW’s “Printing and Publishing Workers Industrial Union 450” was very active in the 1970s and small printing shops and co-operatives constituted the majority of IWW shops during the 1970s.²⁶⁵ At the time the contract was signed, Eastown Printing was the third IWW shop in Michigan²⁶⁶ and was part of an upsurge of IWW activity in the state.²⁶⁷ The contract—which secured improved

The I.W.W. During World War I

In 1917, the IWW once again made an appearance in Grand Rapids. In June, IWW stickers were used to deface military recruiting materials in East Grand Rapids.²⁴⁷ The action was considered “particularly reprehensible” because they were placed directly on recruiting posters. *The Grand Rapids Herald* reported that one of the posters read “Young Man, The Lowest Aim In Your Life Is To Be A Good Soldier.”²⁴⁸ Law enforcement officials reportedly seized the stickers and referred the incident to the District Attorney.

A few months later, the IWW was in the news again when three IWW organizers were found and arrested in the city.²⁴⁹ However, this time it wasn't anti-draft organizing that was at issue, but rather fears of “industrial agitation.” The arrests were the result of an investigation that involved many different law enforcement groups including local law enforcement, the Department of Justice, the Secret Service, and even a private detective agency. At the time, law enforcement officials estimated that the arrests would go a long way towards stopping any anti-draft or industrial organizing that the IWW might otherwise attempt.

These two instances fit in to a general pattern of repression that was undertaken against anti-draft and radical organizing during World War I. Aside from the IWW, repression in Grand Rapids was directed at the Socialist Party and members of the clergy who opposed the war. Mail was seized and the City Council directed local police to work with federal agents to stop the spread of anti-draft and radical propaganda.²⁵⁰ Both clergy and socialists were harassed for speaking out against the draft, with thirteen people being indicted in one case.²⁵¹ In another case, three Socialists were arrested for “conspiracy” after they worked together to hand out anti-draft materials prepared by a socialist organization.²⁵²



The repression in Grand Rapids fit into a larger context of anti-radical repression during the war—much of which was directed at anarchists—as well as a specific government effort aimed at the IWW. The IWW, to some degree anticipating the repression that could come its way, had sought a stance on the war that would protect itself from repression. For example, rather than opposing the draft—which certainly would lead to repression—the IWW left it up to individual members to decide whether to register or not.²⁵³ While it was still opposed to war, many in the union cautioned that an anti-conscription fight would take away organizers. It also toned down rhetoric advocating sabotage and direct action.²⁵⁴

hats in the air, stamped their feet, and yelled in uncontrolled joy over the sight of Emma Goldman clasping hands with a soldier.²⁷¹ After this, Buwalda was followed by plain-clothes police to his military base at Presidio and was arrested and court-martialed.⁷²

This began a life-long friendship between Emma Goldman and William Buwalda—one that would contribute to Goldman's visits to Grand Rapids and Buwalda's conversion to anarchism.

William Buwalda's Early Life

According to various genealogical records, Buwalda's family emigrated from the Netherlands in 1883.⁷³ Buwalda was born in 1869 and lived in Jamestown Township⁷⁴ after moving to the United States. His parents were Dutch speakers and according to census records, they never learned English, presumably getting along well in the rural Dutch area of West Michigan.

Buwalda joined the military out of tradition with his family having a long legacy of military service in the Netherlands.⁷⁵ Buwalda enlisted when he was 23 ½ years old and served five tours of duty before he was court-martialed.⁷⁶ During his time in the military he served in the Philippines, fighting in the Spanish-American War of 1898.⁷⁷ Buwalda's character was routinely described as “excellent” by the military and he had strong record of service.⁷⁸

The Charges Against Buwalda

William Buwalda was tried in military court on May 14, 1908, under the charge that he violated the “62nd Article of War”—a vague statute that basically functioned as a catch-all by the military to prosecute conduct that it did not like. Specifically, Buwalda was charged with “being present in his uniform at an address delivered by one Emma Goldman” and that he “...did frequently and repeatedly applaud said address and did on its conclusion declare to the said Emma Goldman his sympathy for her and his approval of her remarks.”⁷⁹ This was reported in West Michigan in *The Evening Press* on May 4⁸⁰ and by May 8 it was reported that he was likely a resident of the Grand Haven area.⁸¹ Buwalda plead “not guilty” but was convicted and sentenced “to be honorably discharged the service of the United States, forfeiting all pay and allowances due him, and to be confined at hard labor at such place as the reviewing authority may direct for five years.”⁸² Due to his history of positive service in the military, the sentence was quickly reduced to three years of confinement at the military prison on Alcatraz.⁸³ Moreover, the military downplayed Buwalda's agency and said that he was clearly under the sway of an anarchist who had fostered a temporary lapse in his judgment.

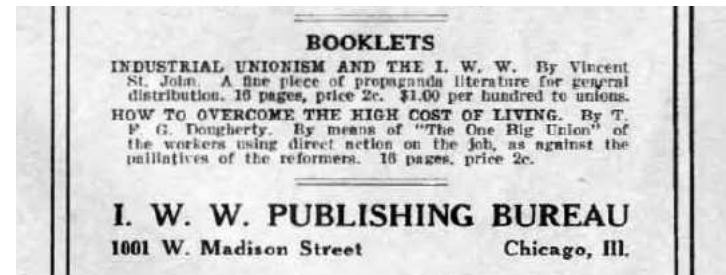
In part, the military pursued Buwalda as aggressively as it did because it wanted

to squash dissent. The Commanding General of the Department of War said that it was “important chiefly by reason of its deterrent effect upon other enlisted men” claiming that the “the benefit of the example afforded by the punishment in this case” would be great.⁸⁴ Even when petitioning for an executive pardon, military officials claimed that the case had guaranteed that “it will be many a year before he or any other soldier participates in an anarchist meeting or applauds abuse of the government to which he had sworn allegiance.”⁸⁵ Moreover, the government made clear its particular disdain for anarchists with General Funston—who commuted Buwalda’s sentence—saying that had the lecture been a socialist one rather than an anarchist one, there would not have been a problem.⁸⁶ Despite this, President Theodore Roosevelt wondered if the sentence was too harsh, asking if it might arouse sympathy in the military ranks for Buwalda.⁸⁷

Buwalda’s arrest and conviction was part of a larger anti-anarchist campaign being waged by the United States government in 1908. In response to an increase in anarchist activity, the growth of the Industrial Workers of the World, and economic uncertainty—as well as two assassination attempts and a bombing attributed to anarchists, repression against anarchists grew.⁸⁸ At the core of this repression was President Roosevelt’s attack on the anarchist press with several publications being barred from the mail (for example, the Italian language *La Questione Sociale*) and those that weren’t barred (i.e. Emma Goldman’s *Mother Earth*) being subject to interference.⁸⁹ Speeches and public meetings were also frequently raided or shut down.

The Anarchists and Buwalda

In response to Buwalda’s imprisonment, Emma Goldman undertook an effort to both inform people about Buwalda’s case and to use her lectures as an opportunity to raise funds to support him. In her autobiography, Emma Goldman credited anarchist agitation with Buwalda’s early release.⁹⁰ At the same time, the government’s prosecution of William Buwalda bolstered Goldman’s critique of patriotism. Goldman said the case essentially came about because Buwalda “...foolishly believed that one can be a soldier and exercise his rights as a man [sic] at the same time.”⁹¹ This clashed with the government’s belief that “the first duty of an officer or enlisted man is unquestioned obedience and loyalty to the government, and it makes no difference whether he approves of that government or not.”⁹² For the government, “patriotism is inexorable and, like all insatiable monsters, demands all or nothing. It does not admit that a soldier is also a human being, who has a right to his own feelings and opinions, his own inclinations and ideas.”⁹³ Moreover, Buwalda’s arrest was used in advertising appeals for her “Patriotism” pamphlet, with the ad reading: “No thoughtful lover of liberty should neglect reading this pamphlet. For applauding this lecture, William Buwalda, of the United States Army, was condemned by court-martial to five years’ military prison.”⁹⁴ *Mother Earth* considered the pamphlet “a valuable addition to our



Advertisement for a Pamphlet by T.F.G. Dougherty

Bearing on the Labor Question” and challenged the gradualism of socialists.²³³ Matilda Rabinowitz—described as “a factory girl of Little Falls, N.Y.” by the *Grand Rapids Press*—spoke in Grand Rapids in 1913.²³⁴ In 1914, Ben Williams was once again a guest speaker at what the IWW described as a “Gigantic MASS MEETING.”²³⁵ The event’s poster was directed at furniture workers who were encouraged to “awaken from your slumbers” and to demand more from the furniture factory owners. The poster reminded workers that they “perform the most difficult and exacting labor of this great city” while the owners take all the profits. The IWW mentioned famous IWW fights in Lawrence, Massachusetts and Paterson, New Jersey where ethnically and racially diverse groups of working people united on the basis of class to fight via “the wonderful power of SOLIDARITY.”

At least one member of Local 202 retained their involvement in both the IWW and radicalism more generally after the Grand Rapids IWW faded. A person named T.F.G. Dougherty from Grand Rapids contributed occasionally to *The Industrial Worker*, providing tactical suggestions that IWW members make use of editorials in major newspapers to spread the word about the union²³⁶ and analyzing the words of the capitalist press in Grand Rapids.²³⁷ Dougherty also contributed to the IWW’s *Solidarity*, providing brief reports on a major strike taking place in the Upper Peninsula during 1913 and 1914.²³⁸ Dougherty ran as a socialist candidate for mayor of Grand Rapids several times²³⁹ and introduced nationally known socialist Eugene Debs when he visited in 1910.²⁴⁰ Dougherty was a member of both the IWW and the International Typographical Workers Union No. 39 in whose national publication *The Typographical Union* he published updates and advocated for working-class action.²⁴¹ The publication reported that he left town in 1913 “after a particularly strenuous IWW campaign.”²⁴² He also published a pamphlet that was circulated throughout the Industrial Workers of the World titled “How to overcome the high cost of living”²⁴³ and participated in national debates about IWW strategy.²⁴⁴ Years later, *The Grand Rapids Press* published a story on Dougherty’s arrest in Seattle under criminal anarchy laws, reporting that he was among the most radical Grand Rapids’ IWW members during the 1910s.²⁴⁵ Dougherty reportedly fled to Canada to avoid the charges.²⁴⁶

could not do anything to stop the city and it would eventually cite its failure to organize workers for its inability to become a force in the city.

Reflections on the Difficulty of Being a Revolutionary Union in Grand Rapids

Through 1914, the IWW in Grand Rapids continued its agitation and retained visibility in town. Organizers such as George Swasey²²⁴ and Herman Richter²²⁵ came to town, while an invitation to “Big Bill” Haywood from a local church to discuss anarchism was apparently rejected.²²⁶ Mayor Ellis continued to demonize the IWW,²²⁷ local newspapers would continue to denounce the IWW as a dangerous organization “far more radical than the socialists” in its advocacy of “sabotage,”²²⁸ and unions continued to attack the IWW.²²⁹

This was the background to a lengthy self-critical analysis titled “What’s the Matter with Grand Rapids?” by Grand Rapids Furniture Workers Local 202 that explored its failure to grow in the city.²³⁰ The union had many members come through it in the years since its founding in 1910, enough where if all who had passed through were active there would be enough for “two or three locals.” However, for a number of different reasons, workers dropped out of the IWW rather quickly. On this point, Grand Rapids wasn’t alone; it was a phenomenon that was affecting other IWW locals across the country.²³¹ Local 202 cited a number of reasons for this, among them that home ownership, which the union argued makes it so that workers were too dependent on the capitalist system to take serious risks. The IWW described it as an example of the “despicable means the robber class and their parasites go to strengthen their grasp on their victims.” They also argued that upsetting Mayor Ellis, who was a self-described friend of labor (in the IWW’s eyes, he just used labor’s votes for his own gain), made it difficult to organize. They said Ellis’ scorn of the IWW was due to their willingness to take on the garbage strike—thereby exposing Ellis as a boss. As a politician, they claimed he further disliked the IWW’s rejection of political strategies in favor of direct action. Moreover, they wrote that the IWW was opposed by the Socialist Party in Grand Rapids which they denounced as “bourgeois” for its willingness to work with the government and its overall conservative approach (it’s worth remembering that many members of the I.W.W. in Grand Rapids were one time Socialist Party members²³²). Finally, they wrote that most importantly, the IWW lacked talented organizers who worked in the shops they were trying to organize. They speculate that there was further confusion brought on by its name—Furniture Workers Local 202—when most of the workers were not furniture workers.

After the garbage workers strike of 1912, there are no reports of job actions by the IWW. However, the union remained active in hosting speakers in Grand Rapids. Later in 1912, G.H. Swasey spoke on “The Philosophy of Anarchism and Its

literature...since it is the first anti-patriotic document in America from an Anarchist standpoint.”²⁹⁵

During his trial, Buwalda said that he did not hold “anarchistic or disloyal views.”²⁹⁶ According to Emma Goldman’s autobiography, Buwalda told her that while he had read about her in newspapers, he was skeptical of her and even considered her a “crank.”²⁹⁷ Buwalda said he happened upon her speech in San Francisco by chance and after seeing the large crowds and police presence, he decided to attend to practice his stenography. When Goldman appeared, he said he began to “feel disturbed.”²⁹⁸ Buwalda tried to shake it off at first, but he soon realized that it wasn’t his health, but rather that he was being challenged by her critique of patriotism and her “eloquence.”²⁹⁹ She quotes him as saying:

“For several days I clung to the belief that you had misrepresented the Government which I had served for fifteen years; that my country was too fair and too just to be guilty of your unreasonable charges. But when I was brought before the military tribunal, I began to see that you had spoken the truth. I was asked what you had done for me that I should mix with such a dangerous person, and I replied: ‘She has made me think.’ Yes, you had made me think, Emma Goldman, for the first time in all my forty years.”¹⁰⁰

Goldman and Buwalda were reunited in San Francisco during another of her lecture tours, where the two met.¹⁰¹ Buwalda and Goldman both agreed to be friends, with Buwalda stating that they should be “Friends for life and comrades as well.”¹⁰² At one of her appearances, Buwalda also spoke.¹⁰³ On January 14, 1909, Emma Goldman and her companion Ben Reitman—who organized many of her lecture tours—were arrested by police detectives. Reitman and Goldman were arrested on eight charges of “conspiracy to riot” which was defined as “the assembly of two or more persons at a meeting where measures are advocated, which if carried out, would lead to riot”¹⁰⁴ For his part, Buwalda was arrested when he objected to the arrests. The charges against Buwalda were dropped after he was reprimanded for “associating with ‘dangerous criminals’.”¹⁰⁵ The charges against Goldman and Reitman were dropped after their release, but they were quickly re-indicted on new charges of “unlawful assemblage, denouncing as unnecessary all organized government” and “preaching anarchist doctrines.”¹⁰⁶ The subsequent trial ended in acquittal. Goldman concluded that the “court farce... did more for anarchism than months of our propaganda might have accomplished.”¹⁰⁷

Buwalda eventually returned to his home in West Michigan, living in the Hudsonville area where he took care of his mother until her death. Census records have him living in Jamestown in 1910¹⁰⁸ and 1930¹⁰⁹ where he lived as a farmer.

Letter Renouncing Service

In many ways, the culmination of Buwalda's odyssey was a letter he wrote to the U.S. government renouncing his service. In it, Buwalda informed the government that he was returning a medal awarded to him for faithful service in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War and that he had serious misgivings about his service in the military:

Hudsonville Michigan
April 6, 1909

Hon. Joseph M. Dickinson
Secretary of War,
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

After thinking the matter over for some time I have decided to send back this trinket to your Department, having no further use for such baubles, and enable you to give it to someone who will appreciate it more than I do.

It speaks to me of faithful service, of duty well done, of friendships inseparable, friendships cemented by dangers and hardships and sufferings shared in common in camp and in the field. But, sir, it also speaks to me of bloodshed—possibly some of it unavoidably innocent—in defence of loved ones, of homes; homes in many cases but huts of grass, yet cherished none the less.

It speaks of raids and burnings, of many prisoners taken and like vile beasts, thrown in the foulest of prisons. And for what? For fighting for their homes and loved ones.

It speaks to me of G.O. 100, with all its attendant horrors and cruelties and sufferings; of a country laid waste with fire and sword; of animals useful to man wantonly killed; of men, women, and children hunted like wild beasts, and all this in the name of Liberty, Humanity, and Civilization.

In short, it speaks to me of War—legalized murder if you will—upon a weak and defenceless people. We have not even the excuse of self-defence.

Yours sincerely,

mayor, etc., but none of those bodies would grant them the raise, thus forcing them to strike. Following the strike, the city government stated that “they [the garbage workers] should have more money,” but they refused to grant the demand because they struck.²⁰⁹ The garbage workers were formally unaffiliated with a union (although some of the strikers were IWW) and undertook the strike on their own. They were denounced by the city's Trades and Labor council, which said the strike was “unwise” and that “the health of the city” was “endangered” due to the possibility of typhoid fever from garbage left on the streets.²¹⁰ On September 16th, it was reported that the garbage workers were planning to affiliate with the IWW which the *Grand Rapids Herald* reported had one-hundred members in various industries in Grand Rapids.²¹¹ Whereas other unions were unwilling to help the strikers, the IWW—distanced as they were by being banned from the Trade and Labor Council—was willing to take up the fight.²¹²

However, the entrance of the I.W.W. into the fight didn't do much to help the strike, which the city was determined to crush. It had already hired replacement workers²¹³ and took the position that the workers had simply quit and would not get their jobs back.²¹⁴ Striking workers would be taken back only as positions opened up and there would be no immediate raise.²¹⁵ They effectively broke the strike by refusing to negotiate.

Mayor George Ellis endorsed this position, while also taking the opportunity to weaken the IWW. Ellis made it clear that he was no fan of the IWW and said that if he had his “...way about it, I would drive them from the city.”²¹⁶ He said that the IWW was an “anarchistic” organization that organized labor shunned (during the strike the Michigan Federation of Labor took up a resolution brought by a Grand Rapids union organizer denouncing the IWW as “anarchist.”)²¹⁷ According to Ellis, he had actively tried to deny them access to the streets of Grand Rapids ever since he attended a rally where the IWW allegedly said that they were glad McKinley was assassinated. The IWW disputed this account, saying that they never held the rally in question and that they did not “...waste time gloating over the deaths of capitalists or their representatives.”²¹⁸ Following the IWW's entry into the garbage strike, Mayor Ellis said that the city would refuse to negotiate with the union.²¹⁹ This inaugurated a policy whereby he refused to allow the union space to organize.²²⁰ Moreover, IWW members were not eligible to be re-hired for their old garbage collection jobs.²²¹ The City of Grand Rapids did eventually agree to pay the workers more, but only at the price that there would be no union.

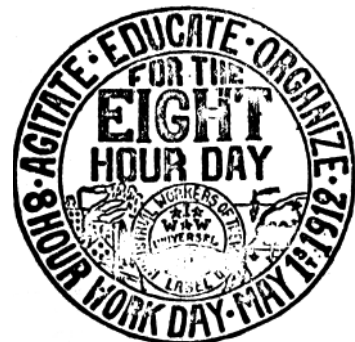
There seemed to be little that the IWW could do in response. The *Grand Rapids Press* reported receiving a communication from Local No. 202 indicating that it had adopted resolutions “condemning” all city officials connected to the strike.²²² The resolution was reprinted in *Solidarity* for readers of the paper. It expressed support for the striking workers, while also condemning city officials—especially those like Mayor Ellis who claimed to be the “friend” of workers.²²³ Yet the union

Beyond writing in *Solidarity*, the IWW sought to use the strike as a way to recruit and to aid in the workers self-organization. During the strike, Local 202 rented a hall and held weekly propaganda meetings and separate business meetings.¹⁹⁸ When the strike started to show signs of becoming more militant in late April, the notorious IWW organizer “Big Bill” Haywood was came to Grand Rapids for an open air meeting to which all furniture workers were invited.¹⁹⁹ A few days later, it was reported that the furniture factory owners were bringing in armed guards to protect their factories.²⁰⁰ Haywood ended up speaking to a crowd of almost 600 at Grand Rapids’ socialist hall. According to the *Grand Rapids Press*, Haywood’s talk was met with “a great deal of interest.” As would be expected, Haywood addressed the furniture strike and encouraged workers to increase their demand—telling them to ask for higher wages and an eight-hour work day instead of the nine-hour day.²⁰¹ A month later, Frank Bohn—a member of the IWW and the Socialist Party—spoke in Grand Rapids on the furniture strike and socialism.²⁰² Near the end of the strike, Local 202 hosted three days of meetings and lectures by W.E. Trautmann. According to the IWW, the meetings were well-attended by workers who were frustrated with the lack of progress in the furniture strike.²⁰³

After the strike finished unsuccessfully, the IWW stayed active and continued to agitate. On and around Labor Day, the IWW organized a massive distribution of a circular titled “Why This Defeat?” that sought to draw out lessons from the strike, largely based on the analysis developed throughout the strike on the pages of *Solidarity*.²⁰⁴ Local 202 brought national organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in September of 1911 to further fan the flames. Flynn told “a fair sized audience” that workers need to continue to organize via the IWW and demand the eight-hour day.²⁰⁵ She argued that legislation on the subject was relatively pointless and that the only way to gain the eight-hour day was through direct action on the job.

The IWW Tries to Organize Garbage Workers

The Grand Rapids Furniture Workers Local 202 did what it could with the members that it had. According to union, it had “...distributed lots of literature, held meetings, hall and street, and taken advantage of various opportunities to advertise the fact of our being.”²⁰⁶ It also submitted letters to local newspapers.²⁰⁷ In 1912, the union continued this agitation while undertaking what would be its most famous fight—an effort to organize the city’s garbage workers.

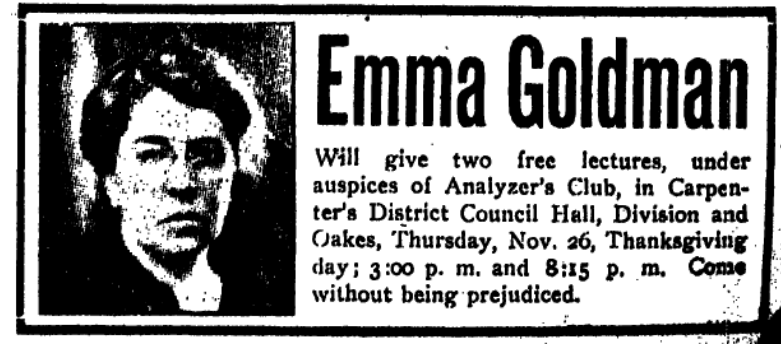


IWW Sticker from 1912

On September 13, 1912, garbage workers in Grand Rapids went on strike to obtain a twenty-five cent raise.²⁰⁸ Before striking, the workers had tried going to the appropriate boards, the

Wm. Buwalda
R.R. No. 3 Hudsonville, Michigan¹¹⁰

Buwalda in Michigan: Emma Goldman a Frequent Visitor



When he first met Emma Goldman, Buwalda was not an anarchist and was skeptical of her views. However, after coming out of prison he became an active participant in the anarchist movement. In the words of anarchist Hippolyte Havel, in Buwalda “the government lost a soldier, but the cause of liberty gained a man.”¹¹¹ Despite his somewhat remote location in the West Michigan countryside, he participated how he could. He published his letter to the United States government in *Mother Earth*¹¹², was a member of The International Intelligence Institute (a liberal and radical network for the exchange of correspondence),¹¹³ he organized Emma Goldman’s Grand Rapids appearances, and he participated in the Analyser Club¹¹⁴ (a group that was seems to have been run by Buwalda and organized Goldman’s lectures and other lectures that were critical of capitalism and religion¹¹⁵). In fact, Goldman had not lectured in Grand Rapids until his involvement.¹¹⁶

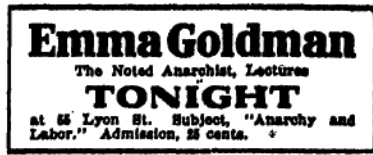
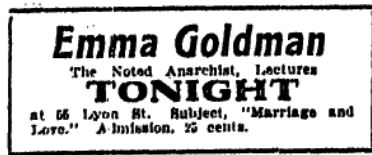
In 1911, Emma Goldman praised Buwalda and his efforts in organizing her Grand Rapids appearances:

“GRAND RAPIDS furnished a new experience, doubly pleasant because of the opportunity it offered to meet once more our ex-soldier, William Buwalda. Our readers have probably been wondering what has become of our friend after his release from the tender arms of the government.

William Buwalda has exchanged the iron bands of mental deception for a free and broader outlook upon life, while his soul, dwarfed for fifteen years by the soldier’s coat, has since expanded and blossomed out like a flower in the fresh and unrestricted air of mother earth. Our comrade has been left with an old mother to look after his father

having died last year. He often longs to go back to the world and to more vital activity, but with his usual simplicity he said, "What right have I, as a free man, to inflict burdens upon others that I am unwilling to carry?" Therefore he remains to take care of the old lady; yet he has not become rusticated. On the contrary, William Buwalda has used his time well, not merely for extensive reading, but for the absorption and assimilation of our ideals. The old Dutch mother, the kindly hostess moving about in her quaint Dutch surroundings, was like a study of Rembrandt. It made one feel far removed from the mad rush of American life.

Buwalda's efforts for the Grand Rapids meeting proved a great success. It was one of the few splendid affairs of this tour."¹¹⁷



A year later, Emma Goldman once again wrote of appearing in Grand Rapids with Buwalda. This time, her assessment was less positive, writing:

"Our visit to GRAND RAPIDS, while causing a considerable loss, was made good through the reunion with our splendid Comrade Wm. Buwalda. He and Comrade Bergman certainly left nothing undone to make the meetings successful. But between the Catholic Church to poison the minds of the masses, and the numerous factories to emaciate their bodies, it is difficult to get a large audience."¹¹⁸

Goldman further reported that Buwalda was "fine as ever"

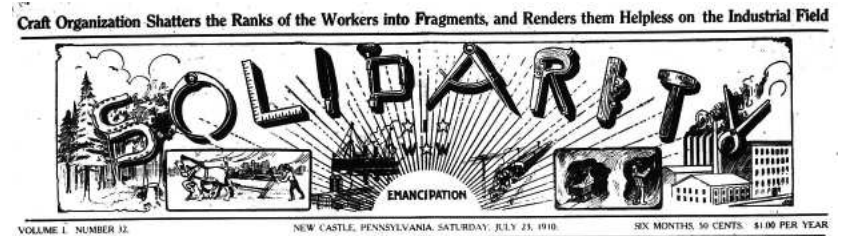
Two years, later Emma Goldman again praised Buwalda's and Bergman's efforts organizing a meeting:

"Grand Rapids, Mich., marks the most exciting and interesting experience of our trip. Two meetings on Thanksgiving Day were arranged by the *Analysers Club*, financially looked after by one man. The work was done by our faithful ex-soldier man Wm. Bulwaldo and Bergman. The afternoon lecture was on "The War and Our Lord." A body of Catholic students who evidently had come to cause disturbance nearly broke up our meeting because I offended their Lord. One chap was very much incensed because E. G. sold such "Vile" literature as Ibsen, Strindberg and Sudermann's works. However, all went off quietly at the end. The evening meeting

Workers Local 202 lacked a large base in the furniture industry—only half of its thirty founding members were employed in the furniture factories—it did what radical groups frequently do in times of crisis and attempted to broaden the scope of the conflict.¹⁸⁵ Whereas other unions counseled caution and spoke out against militant conflict, the IWW encouraged the furniture workers to take more militant stands.¹⁸⁶ When other unions said that workers who participated in riots would lose their jobs, the IWW encouraged workers to take more and to ignore the divisions that separated them by ethnicity and class.¹⁸⁷

Solidarity featured frequent coverage and analysis of the strike beginning from a discussion on the potential for a strike in March¹⁸⁸ through to its defeat in August of 1911.¹⁸⁹ The reports weren't just vague pieces explaining the facts of the strike, but detailed pieces that embodied the theory and practice of the IWW. The IWW was critical of the craft union organization of furniture workers by trade and anticipated that those unions would be unable to win concessions from the bosses.¹⁹⁰ They were critical of the unions who represented skilled furniture workers while they refused to organize non-skilled workers. Similarly, the IWW argued the craft unions sought to avoid a strike by seeking to downplay the conflict and to negotiate with politicians and bosses on behalf of the workers.¹⁹¹ The craft union leaders were acting as mediators of the conflict, making sure there would be no violence by declaring from the start that any workers participating in "rioting" would be kicked out of their respective unions.¹⁹² Furthermore, picketing workers were told by the union to keep an eye out for agitators and rioters and were expected to turn them over to the police. At the same time, they were also expected to protect the factories.¹⁹³ When a "riot" took place, *Solidarity* celebrated the stone throwing and said it was the result of the failure of craft tactics (which they refer to as "wait and starve") and called for the organized defense of those arrested.¹⁹⁴ They also strongly criticized those workers who signed up as "police" to "keep the peace" and said that if there were IWW union police they would arrest the bosses, not their fellow workers. The IWW also defended workers who physically attacked scabs.¹⁹⁵ As the strike progressed, the IWW encouraged the adoption of tactics such as sabotage and passive resistance.¹⁹⁶

Early on, the IWW had anticipated that the strike's likely defeat would illuminate the failure of craft union tactics and make it possible for the IWW to make gains.¹⁹⁷



Solidarity Masthead

workers winning any of their demands¹⁷² and with organized labor weakened and demoralized.¹⁷³ By contrast, the furniture owners and other capitalists were in much stronger position and were able to push through a series of changes to the city government that strengthened their power isolated working class elements. These were the dividing of the city into three wards (2 on the east side of the river where more owners and rich folks lived, and 1 on the west side where much of the working class lived), the creation of a city manager (a professional bureaucrat appointed and not elected to run the city), and a mayor as commissioner.¹⁷⁴ While emboldened by the failure of the strike, the owners were also able to rely on home ownership as a check on dissent, with most workers preferring “stability” to class conflict.¹⁷⁵

Throughout the strike there was the specter of radicalism, even if there was relatively little radical content in the strike. The “violence” and “rioting” that occurred was denounced in the papers of the time.¹⁷⁶ Overall, coverage in the newspapers tended to be either very pro-labor or pro-management, with little balanced reporting.¹⁷⁷ The leaders of the strike—the official union representatives—were quick to distance themselves from militancy, even going so far as to expel members of their unions that engaged in “rioting.”¹⁷⁸ *The Evening News* trotted out a familiar trope—that of mobs of anarchists seeking to destroy the city – and denounced the conflict as “anarchy pure and simple.” When the workers fought back, the dismissals of the strike as “anarchy” took hold and the efforts of the police and law-abiding strikers were praised.¹⁷⁹ The Mayor was able to intervene and blunt the workers’ efforts by organizing citizen-run “peace patrols” to help prevent militancy. These were enthusiastically undertaken by the Dutch furniture workers, who tended to be less militant and were willing to help police more radical elements¹⁸⁰ (interestingly, Dutch workers would also be among the first to go back to the factories when the Christian Reformed Church ruled that union membership was incompatible with their teachings, a decision that affected a third of the strikers¹⁸¹). At the same time, the furniture industry was quick to denounce the strike as the work of “outside agitators”¹⁸² and portrayed it as an essential fight against labor radicalism.¹⁸³ Moreover, there was a concern that a visit by Bill Haywood of the IWW would prompt violence.¹⁸⁴

Despite this, the strike stayed relatively peaceful—especially when compared to what happened in other places during the same time period. Aside from a few limited acts of property destruction, the strike was largely one of people wishing to secure their bread-and-butter interests rather than any type of radical control of the furniture industry or future society.

The I.W.W. and the Furniture Strike of 1911

During the furniture workers strike of 1911, the IWW was one of the workers’ organizations that were active in the fight. While the Grand Rapids Furniture

lacked the presence of the Catholic rowdies, perhaps because they had failed in their aim in the afternoon.”¹¹⁹

In 1914, Buwalda was described in a local newspaper:

“While he is an earnest believer in Miss Goldman’s doctrines, Mr. Buwaldo [sic] is looked upon as a valued citizen. Quiet, unobtrusive and kindhearted, Mr. Buwaldo [sic] attends strictly to his own business, and his neighbors say that his conduct is beyond approach.”¹²⁰

Moreover, it was reported that Emma Goldman rarely traveled through Michigan without paying Buwalda a visit. Goldman’s tour manager and lover, Ben Reitman, enjoyed the visits as well, at one point writing to Goldman that he wished they could both go there to visit for a week.¹²¹ In a letter written to a friend in 1912, Goldman wrote that “I am prouder of having made Buwaldo think, than of anything I have accomplished through all my public work.”¹²²

Buwalda’s Letters to Local Newspapers

Beyond his efforts organizing speaking gigs for Emma Goldman, Buwalda undertook additional efforts at popularizing anarchist views. In three different letters to Grand Rapids area newspapers, Buwalda expressed his anarchist views, especially his rejection of voting.

The earliest letter was written March 6, 1912:

Editor of The Evening Press: In the Public Pulse of Feb. 29 Stacy Brown would require every boy to complete the full public school course before being admitted to full citizenship.”

But having completed such a course would the young man be able to draw correct political conclusions? He would probably read and study what is agreeable to him and toss aside anything that tells him disagreeable truths or dispels vain hopes. Since the ballot is simply a paper representative of the bayonet, the billy and the bullet, does it make any difference whether it is wielded by ignorance or intelligence?

The height of folly of American manhood is the presumption to vote. Ignorance is not changed into wisdom by resorting to a count of noses. If according to Mr. Brown voting is one of right—the right to make fools of themselves if they want to.

The main question is will the ballot give them economic independence. The ballot has utterly failed to give it to the men.

William Buwalda¹²³

Later that year in another letter, Buwalda called for the abolition of the state:

Editor of The Evening Press: From news slowly filtering through the prison walls at Jackson conditions there can better be imagined than described. Terrible indeed the position of “men without rights in the power of men without feelings.” In spite of the frantic denials of Mr. Wernicke the onus probandi is on him, the governor, and the warden. If punishment is to be meted out I would suggest that they apply it to themselves and while resting now and then from their labors read Ingersoll’s “Crimes Against Criminals and Julian Leavitt’s “The Man in the Cage.”

Who is to blame? The people of Michigan primarily. So long as men believe that “might is right” and subject the noninvasive individual to their will, by ballot if they can, by bayonets and bullets if they must, just so long will crimes increase and the problem of the criminal have to be solved.

It is safe to say that governments have committed far more crimes than they have prevented. The compulsory assessment and collection of taxes makes the state a criminal institution and invalidates all its subsequent acts. Abolish the state, cease government of man by man and crimes will gradually disappear.

William Buwalda
Hudsonville, Mich.¹²⁴

Buwalda further outlined his anarchist views in another letter published in 1913:

Editor of The Press: The two conventions just held in Grand Rapids have proven again how anxious our masters are to do something for us, except to get off our back. “Harmony of capital and labor” (like water and oil), “the dignity of labor” (allowing itself to be robbed of four-fifths it produces); “individual rights submerged into the general welfare,” etc., etc., old songs sung to various tunes.

“Give us” (outright begging) and “we demand” (simply whining) is about all the workers have done so far, because they either lack power or are unable to use what power they do have. The capitalist, presumably, takes people as he finds them, and gives them the treatment they consent to put up with. He certainly is successful from his point of view, while

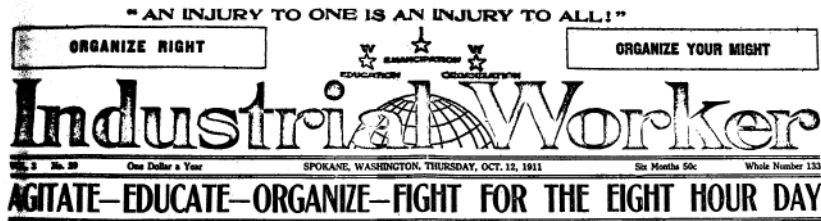
meetings held by IWW members for the purpose of forming a local (which they did as a “mixed local” with 30 members across various industries).¹⁶⁰ Despite its mixed nature, the union specifically sought to organize furniture workers.¹⁶¹ Around the time of its founding, there was also a report of a “banquet” being held for members of the IWW by “the Sons of Marx.” According to a report, the menu included “Low Wages in Season,” “Harmony Served Cold,” and “Long Hours Well Done.”¹⁶² Open air meetings were a frequent tactic, including a series of talks by Stirton in October of 1910.¹⁶³

However, the Grand Rapids IWW’s most active years were ahead of it. In 1911, it would become involved in the legendary furniture strike of 1911 and in 1912, it would attempt to organize the city’s garbage workers—moves that would simultaneously cement its image of radicalism and severely impact its ability to organize. Moreover, the Grand Rapids IWW participated actively in the IWW’s newspapers and its debates, even issuing proposals to make the union more effective (it advocated combining two newspapers, *Industrial Worker* and *Solidarity* into a single paper and increasing the circulation).¹⁶⁴

The Furniture Strike of 1911

The Furniture Strike of 1911 was quite large and affected the largest industry in Grand Rapids. Significant numbers of workers walked off their jobs—3,000 on the starting day of the strike with 6,000 ultimately participating.¹⁶⁵ There were some exciting stories: workers systematically broke every window at the Widdicomb factory where the owner had personally escorted in strikebreakers,¹⁶⁶ workers attacked strikebreakers with stones¹⁶⁷, and there was a “riot” with fighting between police and striking workers in the area of the Widdicomb factory.¹⁶⁸

However, these were by-and-large isolated incidents in a strike that was squarely centered on reformist or “bread-and-butter” demands. There was little if any class consciousness or conceptualizing of the strike as a fight against capitalism, instead the workers were hoping for modest gains: a reduction in hours, better wages, and the ability to organize. In many ways, the Furniture Strike of 1911 was the culmination of the owners’ unwillingness to improve working conditions in the furniture industry. Going back to around 1900, there had been various efforts by workers to improve their conditions.¹⁶⁹ The furniture industry was very hostile to union organizing and the various companies cooperated to prevent unions from forming through their Furniture Manufacturers Association and Employers Association. The Employers Association hired workers in the furniture industry while also keeping files on workers, tracking union sympathies, and blacklisting workers.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, social peace was bought by giving workers just enough access to “the American dream” to keep them content. In this case, home ownership served as a moderating influence with workers generally being able to purchase homes in the city.¹⁷¹ The strike ultimately ended without the



Industrial Worker Masthead

organizing and strategy, as well as suggestions for propaganda including the plastering of stickers¹⁴⁸ and the use of music to spread its ideas.¹⁴⁹

A New Era: I.W.W. Furniture Workers Local 202

By July 1910, the Grand Rapids Industrial Workers Union No. 327 had given way to a new IWW local in Grand Rapids, the Grand Rapids Furniture Workers Local 202.¹⁵⁰ In 1909, a national speaker with the IWW—Benjamin Williams—spoke in Grand Rapids.¹⁵¹ In December of 1910, Local 202 held an open meeting on the topic of “Why Should Union Men Join the Militia?”¹⁵² During this time, the IWW was growing across the country, with membership estimated at 9,100 in 1910 and growing to 18,000 during the height of the Grand Rapids IWW’s life.¹⁵³ During this era, the IWW on a national scale was organizing more strikes, sharing organizing skills amongst workers (for example, articles in its newspaper titled “How to Organize” and “The Art of Lecturing”), and moving organizers and members around the country to aid locals.¹⁵⁴ The Grand Rapids local participated in these debates, regularly sharing its activities and the lessons that it had learned in the IWW newspapers *The Industrial Worker* and *Solidarity*.

The union organized regular events designed to spread its ideas and promote the union. An early example was a street meeting following a Salvation Army event in July of 1910.¹⁵⁵ According to a report in *The Industrial Worker*, it stood out among its regular street meetings due to the enthusiastic crowd that gathered. More than just gaining listeners, the union reported good literature sales and five new memberships. The report also says that some reformers advocating electoral politics stalked around the area, but were put off by the IWW’s advocacy of direct action on the job. Three-hundred people listened to speeches by A.M. Stirton (a former editor of *Solidarity* who visited Grand Rapids for a week to build up support for the union¹⁵⁶) and Frank Morris out of Chicago.¹⁵⁷ Stirton—who was a former member of the Socialist Party and editor of a Michigan-based socialist newspaper called *The Wage Slave*—was a nationally known socialist who toured the country extensively. He relocated to Grand Rapids in 1910 after editing *Solidarity*.¹⁵⁸ Stirton was one of many ex-Socialist Party members in the Grand Rapids IWW. By the end of 1910, Stirton had relocated to Grand Rapids and was organizing with the IWW.¹⁵⁹ In *Solidarity*, it was reported that this was one of many propaganda

the rhetoricians who nag the workers to attempt to persuade the capitalist that he should treat them as he “ought,” i.e. as they say they should be treated, fail. The capitalist apparently has gauged their measure correctly, but they have not gauged his. The presumption is that they are what he takes them for and not what they say they are. The vital concern for the worker is not what the capitalist does, but what they are.

Individuals in all ages have struggled to win the control of themselves for themselves. To do so it has been necessary for them to disregard the “cultured” tendency to submit to the claims advance by gods, churches, states, ideas, causes, institutions and nations innumerable. When the sphere of an individual’s ownership has shrunk to the extent where it is co-terminous with his own powers and person, unless he can immediately widen the boundary, he is forced to sell himself. He ceases to be his own master. He becomes the hired man, effecting the satisfaction of others whether whole-time as a slave, or part-time as a wage earner.

Power then is the heart of the whole problem. When power becomes more self-conscious it will make it clear that while dignity and freedom are myths, power is a reality and that it comes from within.

William Buwalda
Hudsonville, Mich.¹²⁵

Conclusion

William Buwalda remained a committed anarchist following his release from prison. He nurtured a relationship with Emma Goldman and met local anarchists like Charles Bergman. He made attempts to maintain connections to the anarchist movement, using the International Intelligence Institute as a way to connect with anarchists elsewhere. Buwalda died at the age of 76 at the Michigan Veterans Facility in Grand Rapids.¹²⁶

THE IWW

In 1905, a “Continental Congress of the Working Class” convened in Chicago to establish a radical labor union that would unite the entire working class.¹²⁷ The union that emerged was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The founding conference included members of a number of different radical and labor organizations including the Socialist Labor Party/Socialist Trades &

Labor Alliance, Socialist Party of America, Western Federation of Miners, and members of the defunct anarchist International Working People's Association (IWPA). Those present agreed that the IWW should organize all workers (unlike craft unions which only organized skilled workers) and that its goal would be "the abolition of the wage system."¹²⁸ The IWW argued that the union could be both a tool in the fight against capitalism as well as an essential part of a post-capitalist society. Thus they saw their work as "forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old."¹²⁹



By 1911, many radicals had left the Socialist Party for the IWW, as the party had become middle-class and reformist.¹³⁰ This was true in Grand Rapids, where an incarnation of the IWW that formed in 1910 was made up of ex-Socialist Party members who had come to reject the ideas of "political action" and the strategy of seeking state power.¹³¹ While the I.W.W. was not officially an anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist union, it was a multi-tendency space in which anarchists organized.¹³² The IWW has been the site of many factional fights as different ideologies competed for influence.¹³³ Anarchists played a strong role in the IWW's founding and anarchists were involved in many IWW locals, such as those in Paterson, NJ (a site of famous IWW confrontations).¹³⁴ Anarchist participation shaped the IWW and influenced the form it would take over the years.¹³⁵ The government's official position was the organization was not "anarchistic" in evaluating its politics and views for the purposes of figuring out how best to destroy it.¹³⁶ A group of anarchists and surrealists who played a key role in reviving the IWW in the 1960s, summarized the IWW as such: "U.S. history has never known a revolutionary mass movement more open-ended, imaginative, or creative than the Wobblies."¹³⁷ This spoke to the open spirit that attracted many anarchists to the I.W.W. during its heyday and beyond. In Grand Rapids, the IWW enthusiastically adopted anti-electoral views and supported worker initiative.

The I.W.W.'s Beginnings

Shortly after the IWW's founding in 1905, it made its first appearance in Grand Rapids. As it was in many cities, its appearance was met with hostility from other sectors of organized labor that rejected its revolutionary approach. The Trades and Labor Council warned workers not to associate with the IWW in hopes of preventing it from gaining "a foothold" in the city.¹³⁸

However, the IWW had already gained a presence, obtaining enough interested workers to form a local affiliate on May 16, 1906: the Grand Rapids Industrial Workers Union No. 327.¹³⁹ Just prior to the organization's founding, an I.W.W. organizer from Chicago had visited the city and held an open-air meeting.¹⁴⁰

Unfortunately, their activity is largely unknown. In a letter to the *Grand Rapids Chronicle*, they contrasted their aims with those of craft unions such as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which campaigned for a "fair day's wage for a fair day's work" whereas the IWW advocated "To the worker the full value of the product of his toil." They went on to clarify that in order to grant this demand; they were seeking the "entire abolition of the wage system." They encouraged workers to consider joining the IWW because its new forms of organization—ability to transfer jobs, low initiation fees, openness to any worker in any industry—would give workers more power than they had under old forms of union organization.

The IWW's position was a minority one and one that would gain it scorn in the press and within the labor movement. The *Grand Rapids Chronicle* editorialized against radicalism, taking an especially harsh stance against "anarchy" that the IWW was often associated with:

"Labor union men should avoid any favorable recognition of anarchy and should discountenance any and all such meetings and public gatherings. Any other course will sound the death knell of the labor union movement..."¹⁴¹

The paper went on to state that "...the line which now divides socialism from anarchy is so dim there is a danger of them stepping across without realizing what they have done." Socialism—with its promises of "municipal and governmental ownership of utilities, the referendum, etc."—was to be avoided just like anarchism.¹⁴² It was in this anti-radical context that the Grand Rapids IWW tried to organize. While socialism was regularly discussed in the city and socialist politicians made some inroads by participating in local elections and organizing political parties, the IWW was associated with anarchism and extremism. Local newspapers were generally hostile to labor radicalism and socialism, but they did their best to prop up socialists as a legitimate form of opposition. The newspapers actively encouraged socialists to denounce and separate themselves from anarchism, with articles drawing simplified distinctions between the two ideas.¹⁴³

Not much else is known about the activities of Industrial Workers Union No. 327. It is among the many IWW locals over the years that faded away. Between the years of 1906 and 1907, approximately 928 locals were formed.¹⁴⁴ In this era, as in much of the IWW's history, turnover amongst locals was quite high. In its heyday of 1905 to 1917, it is estimated that as many as 2,000 local unions had been formed and as many as 200,000 people had passed through the union's ranks.¹⁴⁵ In 1906 the Grand Rapids union would have been among the many in a union that was rapidly growing.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, the IWW newspaper, *Industrial Union Bulletin*, withheld information on new charters and activities out of fear that they would be attacked by reactionaries.¹⁴⁷ Instead, the newspaper enthusiastically promoted the union's growth and was filled with debates over