

ARTICLE

SNAP-SHOTS OF THE I.W.W. CONVENTION, 1906.¹

V. PRESIDENTS.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE issue raised by the abolition of the presidency in the I.W.W. offers a warning to those temperaments that are ever ready to draw conclusions from one-legged premises, wholly disregarding the scores of matters that deserve consideration before a safe conclusion can be arrived at. The issue also warns against the error, but too often slipped into, of confusing matters that are purely “practical” with matters of “theoretic” importance, and raising the former to the elevation of the latter.

The theoretical posture of the anti-presidentialists will not bear investigation. The upholders of a false theory need but be “given rope,” and they will be speedily seen to dash the theory themselves. There is not a theoretical principle advanced by the anti-presidentialists that has not been advanced before, and put to the test by the Anarchist. I use the term Anarchy, in this connection, in its strict etymologic sense, the sense that Anarchy has itself deliberately chosen and fully explained—AN-ARCH, that is NO-HEAD or individual CHIEF. The experience furnished by the An-archist may, accordingly, be justly taken as the test of the anti-presidentialist. It furnishes at once the obverse and the reverse of the medal.

The obverse of the An-archist medal is the picture presented by An-archist meetings. I have attended just one An-archists’ meeting that had no chairman, and that single exception was more of the nature of a “reading-bee,” at which the

¹ [Series title changed without explanation.]

“Illuminati” sat in a circle, each alternately reading a paragraph from Bakounine and commenting thereon. The affair differed, in point of method, in nothing from private literary sociables. It could not be said to be cast in a “new mold.” For the rest all An-archist meetings I ever attended were presided over by a chairman. Nor was the spectacle of An-archists (no-head men), of men whose theoretical starting point is the abolition of the Arch (head), “sitting at the feet” of an Arch (chairman), the only, or the most amazing feature of these meetings. There was worse. No chairman of Pro-archists wields so autocratic a gavel at their meetings as does the chairman of An-archists. There is no instance, in the whole catalogue of biology, of a head so completely running away with the body as the Arch at the An-archist meetings—and that not because of any temperamental tyrannical arrogation of power on the part of the Arch but by virtue of a consensus of opinion deliberately raised by the membership to the dignity of a canon. The parliamentary practice of Pro-archists limits the chairman’s power, and reserves to the meeting itself the right to overturn his ruling on appeal. It is otherwise with the An-archist’s parliamentary practice. The An-archist’s parliamentary practice, handed down, as tradition has it, by Josiah Warren, and revered, and proudly adhered to by the An-archist, vests the chairman with autocratic power—THERE IS NO APPEAL FROM HIS RULINGS. It is no figure of speech that the only thing within the fold of what is called civilization, resembling the Arch of An-archists’ meetings, is the Tsar of Russia, arch-ing it over the Russian nation in perpetual mass meeting assembled. That much for the obverse of the medal furnished by An-archy.

The reverse of the medal presents the other extreme. The theoretical denial of the Arch adhered to, leads, first, to the formation of “autonomous groups” without cohesion the one with the others, and, consequently, unable to operate together; secondly, to the dissolution of even these groups into “autonomous individuals,” in short utter disintegration with resulting impotence—a pathetic demonstration of the ruin that attends the neglect of the principle “United we stand, divided we fall.”

The theoretic denial of the Arch places the theory between two alternatives: one is that, in order to save the organization, the theory must be sacrificed, and then, that happens that always happens when principle is preserved upon the lips but violated in practice—the practice flies to an extreme beyond even that against

which the principle was raised; the other alternative is that, in order to save the theory, the organization must be sacrificed, and then, that happens that always happens when blind bigotry sacrifices the goal to the means. The obverse and reverse of the medal furnished by the experience of Anarchy dethrones an-archy from the throne of a theory. But does experience say nothing in favor of the anti-presidentialists? It does, and what it says brings the “theory” down to its true plane, the plane of a practical proposition, to be dealt with, as all practical propositions must, according as each particular case may indicate.

There were in the I.W.W. convention at least five delegates who typified the pro-presidential idea, and held it up as a sacrosanct theory. These were Sherman, Mahoney, Kirkpatrick, McCabe, and Keogh of New York. The performances of these men at the convention almost justified one to fly to the opposite extreme of raising anti-presidentialism to the dignity of a fundamental principle. It is hard to imagine five inept men—Keogh typified their combined hollowness; it is hard to imagine five duller men—Kirkpatrick typified their combined dullness; it is hard to imagine five windier men—Mahoney typified their combined windiness; it is hard to imagine five more stupid men—McCabe typified their combined stupidity; it is hard to imagine five more ignorant men—Sherman typified their combined imbecility. I may be too optimistic with regard to human nature, nevertheless it is my belief that hollow, dull, windy, stupid and imbecil as the bunch is, in their proper spheres the men would have filled useful places, and that the viciousness, born of conceit, which they developed was but the result of their elevation to presidential offices. It seems there is something in the title of the office which acts like bad liquor on the brain, or a little good liquor on weak heads. A certain experience made by the Socialist Movement in Germany would seem to add strength to my theory.

In the days of the Bismarck laws, when Socialism was out-lawed, it was dangerous to be the Editor of a Socialist paper. At any moment something that appeared in the paper might be construed as criminal by the Police, and the Editor would be arrested, and made to serve a term in jail. The Movement in Germany faced the danger of being left editor-less. Under these circumstances a plan was devised to avoid the danger. All papers have to announce the name of the responsible Editor. The real Editor’s name was not announced: instead, the name of

some comrade, who, however worthy otherwise, could be missed by the paper, was entered as the responsible editor. Arrests continued numerous, but the agitational power of the papers remained unimpaired. The actual Editor, and really “guilty” party, remained at large; the nominal Editor was locked up. And so it came to pass that these nominal Editors became inflated with their own importance, and there being so many of them, and so frequently performing the valuable function of substituting the real Editor, that they began to cause the Movement no slight annoyance with what we would here call their “swelled heads.” These Editors, named “Sitz-Radakteur” (sitting-editors, from sitting in prison being their real function) were in most instances estimable Socialists, but the title of the office was more than they could carry. It is so with presidencies.

Neither pro-presidency nor anti-presidency is a fundamental theory. Whenever a president is needed{,} whether at meetings, or at critical moments demanding centralized authority for united action, he will be unquestionably appointed, with all the safeguards which, upon the smaller plane of meetings, parliamentary practice provides—and then he will be what Haywood declared in the first convention that the President should be{,} “the smallest potato in the row.” Outside of such occasions and emergencies, experience recommends the dropping of “Presidents.” They are merely clothes-horses. The title and the office tends to spoil good men, and to make bad ones worse.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
Uploaded June 2009

slpns@slp.org