
The Rise and Failure of an Unemployed League:

Showing How Seattle Radicals Tried to Organize with a
View to Conservative Slave Psychology and Failed

by Charles J. Schiffman

Published in *Solidarity* [Cleveland], vol. 6, whole no. 263 (Jan. 23, 1915), pg. 1.

(Special to *Solidarity*.)

Seattle, Wash., Jan. 5 [1915].

Many letters come to me from different locals, so I will cover the “Unemployed League” situation:

On November 8 [1914], 2,500 residents of Seattle gathered at Redman Hall to discuss unemployment, the greatest problem of present day society. The meeting was held under the auspices of the Open Forum, conducted by Dr. [Hermon] Titus. The unemployed, led by Joyce Schiffman and Marguerite Titus, marched on the hall, demanding alleviation from distress.

Among the speakers was Mayor [Hiram C.] Gill, who offers as a solution that married men send their wives to the poor farm, their babies to the detention home, and that they themselves offer their services at the public stockade for four hours for keep.

Another speaker was Austin Griffiths, police chief, who says men and women will get the necessities of life whether they find work or not, and admits that something must be done. Also Pauley, the man who has come into the limelight as a very competent organizer of unemployed single men, inasmuch as he caters to the class that has much land to clear and starvation wages to pay.

Walter C. Smith, past editor of *The Industrial Worker*, gave a very snappy talk covering the information that it was up to the workers themselves; that no one else could do anything for them. He said he solved the problem personally last winter. The unemployed should do likewise; property is the product of labor, and property has no rights which a hungry man is bound to respect.

Charles J. Schiffman was the first speaker at the meeting, and showed how foolish it was for Mayor Gill to advise [unemployed workers?] become charity [cases, since] this solves no problem other than to break the hearts of those concerned. He said that the mayor was in damned small business as an individual dividing that which all forces of nature had driven together. Schiffman also objected to charity in all its phases as a commercialized institution.

Mayor Gill, who followed Schiffman, said he was sick and assumed that he had been personally attacked by the previous speaker, Schiffman, whom he had never met. He immediately took it upon himself to make Schiffman a liar. But a man named Weber who was in the audience happened to have been the spokesman for the 250 married men whom Gill had personally advised, came back with, "Mayor Gill, you are a liar; I am the man you advised to separate the families, as Schiffman said." Gill closed with a statement that he never asked for our votes nor would he.

James P. Thompson was called for and after much applause he addressed the meeting, making a fine talk on organization. He said "there was no solution for this question, except for the workers to get together in one big union and compel those in control of the industries to turn the same over to the workers." Thompson was at his best and all his clear-cut remarks were met with hearty applause.

Joe Foley told of his past experiences and proved to his audience that the unemployed at least in one instance were fit to control and handle in no small way the problem of unemployment as far as the alleviation of distress was concerned.

Dr. Titus closed with a few remarks, after offering ten resolutions, which were adopted unanimously.

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The following morning, Joe Foley approached Schiffman with an organization plan. The plan was discussed at length; we decided to try to organize the unemployed element that were not members of any craft union and would not join any industrial union because of religious, patriotic, and press prejudice. We were satisfied that we would have to offer something that would appeal to this element. There was no work at any wages and in most cases any wage would have sufficed. So we took into consideration their psychology — with patriots there is an excuse for all the reverses of the nation. With the religious there is an excuse for charity. With propaganda, we said, there might develop an organization in the future. So, we said, there might develop an organization in the future. So., we said, the psychology is such that a discarded coat from Rev. Matthews, or a package of beans from the local market will appeal to these. Later this proved to be true. We tried to hold a meeting, but our banner was arrested. We felt light fighting,

but found that we did not have enough strength, so we fell in with the open forum which was an organized, established body. Here we organized, and 9 men and 2 women were nominated from and elected by the mass.

This committee was to represent the whole, with Schiffman as secretary; Mrs. H. Leloyd, treasurer; Joe Foley, chairman. The committee was composed of members of the AF of L, IWW, and a couple of at large members of no organization.

I wrote appealing letters to the daily capitalist papers that we might get publicity — they answered nothing in three instances; in the fourth, the *Seattle Times* or “Crimes,” gave us the only notice, informing the public that we were “I Won’t Works.”¹ We got out our own paper, to get the facts to the public and do what we could to combat class prejudice. We got out a “mutual” paper, one with appeals for general cooperation, and met with this success: the chief of police had retired from office by this time and donated a headquarters for our league — now “The Unemployed League of Seattle.”

We moved in and right off the reel started selling our paper. The paper and the linotype were donated. The unemployed were each given a bundle of papers; they were sold for 5 cents a copy, 3 cents of which went to those who made an effort to sell them. Later it was necessary to pay expense money to committee men as they were so busy spreading propaganda, receiving and distributing food and clothing, they were working 17 hours a day. So it was decided to pay 2 cents to each paper girl, 2 cents to the upkeep of press, and 1 cent to go into a fund to pay committee men and women.

We registered 4,073 married and single men and women; received 4,503 pieces of clothes; gave groceries to 493 families, 1,047 pieces of clothing to men and women, medical attention to one mother-to-be and her children; furnished quarters for 7 women and 3 families, also fed 115 men daily who pulled the wagon bearing the sign, “1,200 Hungry Men and Women in Seattle. What Are You Going to Do About It?” This wagon brought home the bacon.

Joe Foley left for Portland, and Sargent was made editor of the paper for one edition. Charges were made in committee meeting that the policy of the paper was changed. Some thought the paper too conservative; others, too radical. The radicals won out and John M. Foss was made editor. No. 4 of the paper came out a radical sheet. The middle class and small business men refused to donate.

Hungry men looked for us to replenish the food supply. We could not do so, so they took the situation into their own hands. I looked forward to a time when the League could establish itself in a propaganda hall where such men as James P. Thompson, Dr. [E.J.] Brown, Jay Fox, and others might

¹ Ironic conservative twist on the meaning of “I.W.W.” — commonly used in the West during this period.

speak and debate subjects that would tend to broaden the minds of the men and women who could not be reached in any other way now except through their stomachs. A few committee men were elected who did a fine job to help the bosses and our opponents in the work the social agency and their representatives organized at the DeGink, now called the Liberty Hotel, who are trying to take advantage of laborers out of work.

Those newly elected members, whether incidentally or not, sabotaged the Unemployed League.

While I was at my room a half mile away getting my books ready for audit, as I segregated receipts, they took records, some money, and beat it. A case of rule or ruin, with no object apparently other than personal gain.

And so died the Unemployed League of the Pacific coast. I am held in the balance today as an inciter to riot, because some of my class had the courage to eat when hungry and preferred the jails as a shelter to a box car or a Pauley DeGink soup and flop house.

Those charges will not be pressed.

Charles J. Schiffman.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport

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