

FANNING THE FLAMES OF DISCONTENT: THE FREE SPEECH FIGHT OF THE
KANSAS CITY INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD AND THE MAKING
OF MIDWESTERN RADICALISM

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FANNING THE FLAMES OF DISCONTENT: THE FREE SPEECH FIGHT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

This project deals with the free speech fight of 1911 that occurred in Kansas City and was organized and led by the Industrial Workers of the World. The free speech fight serves as a case study in localized Midwestern radicalism, specifically its unique manifestation in Kansas City. While many scholars of labor radicalism have focused on the larger metropolitan areas such as Chicago, New York City, and Detroit, this study departs from that approach by examining how labor radicalism took root and developed outside of the metropolitan centers. The Industrial Workers of the World, one of the most radical unions in American history, provides an excellent example of an organization that situated itself outside of the traditional spheres of labor organization through its intense focus on recruiting and radicalizing large segments of the unskilled and marginalized workforce throughout the country.

In the Midwest, particularly in Kansas City, this focus evolved into a growing recognition that in order to be a stable, combative, and growing union in the Midwest, traditional notions of only recruiting white skilled workers employed in industry would not work. The IWW recognized that Kansas City, geographically and economically, attracted migrant workers and immigrant workers who were eager to find employment. Industries such as textiles, railroad construction, and meatpacking formed the backbone of Kansas City's industry, while migrant farm labor and small farming, especially in wheat, employed a large percentage of workers in eastern Kansas and around Kansas City. This led the IWW in Kansas City to embark on a different trajectory dictated by local conditions in which the industrial workers, who were largely immigrant and non-white, would be united with agricultural migrant workers in the same union. This proved to be instrumental in the campaign for free speech in 1911, since without this unity and combative stance the small branch in Kansas City would have been defeated by the better organized and numerous police force.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Fanning the Flames of Discontent: The Kansas City IWW’s Free Speech Fight and the Making of Midwestern Radicalism,” presented by Kevin R. Bailey, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all the workers and oppressed peoples around the world who have struggled unremittingly throughout the centuries for justice and liberation, especially those whose names have been lost to history. They knew that making revolution was no crime and they dared to rebel. This is their history, but it is ours as well. To those of us who are here now, strive on untiringly to victory and fly the red flag high. We have a world to win.

“You are either with the I.W.W. or you are against them. You are either for the police or the workers. There is no half-way position.”¹ Those were the stark terms that appeared in a letter written by the Kansas City Socialist Party branch to the IWW’s *Industrial Worker* in the fall of 1911. That year Kansas City was the site of a struggle for the Industrial Workers of the World, colloquially known as the “Wobblies,” to be afforded their basic constitutional right to free speech. The “Free Speech Fights,” as they had come to be known from previous campaigns in cities such as Fresno and Spokane, were an organized attempt to force the authorities to recognize the union’s right to freely disseminate their views in the public space. The sentiment that was displayed in the *Kansas City Journal*’s coverage of the escalating conflict between the I.W.W. and Kansas City’s municipal authorities expressed the situation with a similar dichotomy, albeit from a more conservative viewpoint. “Who is going to run Kansas City, Mayor Brown and the board of police of commissioners, or the organization known as the I.W.W.’s...?”²

The conflict in Kansas City in the fall of 1911 widened the gulf between the local authorities and the Wobblies, a situation that would have been familiar to workers and local officials in the strongholds of I.W.W. membership on the west coast. The towns, cities, and camps that coagulated around the logging industry in the Pacific Northwest

¹ Kansas City Socialist, “A Fight For Free Speech.” *Industrial Worker*, November 9, 1911.

² “I.W.W. Lectures Before the Board.” *Kansas City Journal*, October 19, 1911.

were fertile grounds for Wobbly recruitment and activity. The IWW's success was due to the migratory nature of the workers, low pay, hostility to union organization by employers, and the designation of "unskilled labor" assigned to the job.³ On the surface, Kansas City was devoid of such historically fertile industries for organizing. However, it was geographically situated as a key commercial and cultural crossroads. The IWW occupied a distinct position in the radical labor movement that enabled it to capitalize on the unique geographic and economic landscape of Kansas City while maintaining their allegiance to their radical ideals and practice.

The IWW's adamant commitment to political class struggle and revolution, as opposed to the gradualist approach of political reform and economism⁴ espoused by other unions and parties, appealed to workers who were opposed to the emerging machine politics, the city-manager system, and the alienating and exploitative industrial factories emerging in the city. The message of the IWW also appealed to the farm hands, tenant farmers, and harvest workers who occupied a precarious position of employment in an industry with little to no recognition of the rights of workers regarding the length of the work day, union rights, or a minimum wage. Both segments of workers were often shut

³ See Philip S. Foner's chapter on "Ideology and Tactics" from *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: The Industrial Workers of the World 1905-1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1973). for the inter-organizational debates surrounding conditions for membership and recruitment tactics.

⁴ A tactical approach within the socialist movement that solely focuses on winning economic concessions while ignoring political mobilization and struggle. See Vladimir Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* (New York: International Publishers, 1929) for an explanation and criticism of the tendency of economism.

out by the mainstream union politics that catered to white skilled workers. These marginalized agricultural and industrial workers were drawn to the rhetoric of the I.W.W. that promised a betterment of their conditions through an inclusive and united effort of workers, which made no distinctions based on sex, race, or skill.

In order to understand the purpose of the free speech fights, and the mentality of those who participated, it is imperative that the impetus for campaigning for it is not based in an American tradition of allegiance to the Constitution, but is rooted in the class-based politics and perspective of the IWW. The IWW wasn't concerned with protecting the abstract notion of free speech present within a document that formed the basis for a state that they regarded as acting only in the interests of the ruling class. True to their insistence on class struggle in the workplace, they carried class struggle into the political realm as well. The First Amendment was cited and utilized by the IWW as a tactical tool to protect their class and their union, not as a document enshrining a universalized conception of free speech that extended to their class enemies, the bosses and their politicians.

Despite the IWW's opposition to the ideology and tactics of many of the major labor unions and political parties of the day, it still occupied a firm position within the Midwestern radical tradition. Chicago was the site of the founding convention in 1905, as well as the home of the organization's national headquarters. Other Midwestern cities like Detroit, Cleveland, and St. Louis all harbored significant numbers of I.W.W. members and locals. By 1911 the I.W.W. had approximately 13,800 members spread

across multiple local branches throughout the country, although across all labor organizations the I.W.W. only comprised .5% of organized workers.⁵ Even despite these small numbers, the I.W.W. was nationally known due to its radical ideology and successful strikes and campaigns from Lawrence, Massachusetts to Spokane, Washington.

The emergence of the IWW Local 61 in the spring of 1911 caused a stir amongst Kansas City's press and police department. Although the presence of radicals in Kansas City was small, there was a local Socialist Party branch and the publishing house of America's most widely read radical newspaper *Appeal to Reason* was located in Girard, Kansas. In the previous decades the Knights of Labor had been a powerful working-class presence in the city, which at their highpoint brought local industry to a standstill in 1886 with a railroad and packinghouse strike, but by the first decade of the twentieth century they had been defeated and marginalized by the local business community and police, who had effectively locked them out of the political system.⁶ The vacuum of radical union politics, left by the departure of the Knights of Labor from the majority of Kansas City workplaces, combined with the unfeasibility of union-based efforts to work through the local political channels, created the conditions in which the only form of unionism

⁵ Paul Brissenden, *The I.W.W.: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1919).

⁶ Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 121.

that was possible was one that focused solely on organizing the workplace and working outside of the established political system. This was the radical and fiery brand of industrial unionism that the IWW preached, and Kansas City's industrial and immigrant workers were ripe to receive their message.

The IWW represented a new a new kind of class-based politics in American radicalism that drew its ranks from the lowest sectors of the laboring classes, the most alienated and precarious stratum of the working class, which were those workers who were unconnected by family, geography, or economy to any region. These migratory, and predominantly young, workers were totally dependent on the spatial movement of capital to secure employment, and were particularly susceptible to the cyclical nature of boom and bust cycles in which they would be the first part of the labor force to be shed. This situation was unlike what faced their skilled counterparts in the AFL and other craft-based unions who maintained a minimal sense of security due to their skill set, which allowed them to remain above most of their competition in the labor market, and the steady wage that had been secured through the establishment of these craft unions which could protect workers from the worst effects of an economic downturn.

The question of how such a political movement could exist and flourish has been the subject of historians such as James Green. Green's work focuses on the successes of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma, citing their commitment to politicized class struggle, combined with a religiously inspired "moral radicalism," as the reason for radicalism's

gains in the Midwest.⁷ Historians following in Green's footsteps, such as Jim Bissett, have focused on the precarious nature of migratory agricultural work, and "movement culture", as the animating forces behind radicalism's success in the Midwest.⁸ While Kansas City was a cultural crossroads, the cultural mix present in Oklahoma, namely the unique blend of the moral teachings of Christianity, Jeffersonian principles, and Marxism, were not present in Kansas City. Unlike the rural based labor radicalism that found an audience amongst small farmers in places like Oklahoma by appealing to the shared beliefs and traditions of the region, the IWW actively avoided speaking in overt religious terms. Instead of repackaging their message of class struggle as a non-alien and quintessentially American concept, as was done in places like Oklahoma, the IWW presented their vision in an unwavering radical framework. With Kansas City's diverse industrial make-up, and the emerging cultural variety, radicalism couldn't be repacked to appeal to a shared tradition or moral belief system. The radicalism in Kansas City had to be presented as emanating from the common experience that stretched across the lines of race, sex, culture, industry, and religion. The experience that could unite the industrial workers in Armourdale, the harvest workers and tenant farmers of the surrounding rural

⁷ James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

⁸ Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

areas, and the unemployed in a Midwestern metropolis was the shared experience of class.

Philip Foner, a labor historian who has done an organizational history of the IWW, argues that much of their success stemmed from a commitment to organize all workers, regardless of profession or skill, into one union.⁹ This allowed the IWW to fill the gaps in the labor movement that were traditionally not recruited by the largely skill-based trade unions. In Kansas City this broadening of acceptable union recruiting was absolutely necessary for the expansion and maintenance of the IWW. While Foner is correct in stating that the relative openness of the IWW compared to other contemporary unions was a helpful recruiting tool, the environment in which this was carried out shouldn't be underestimated. While individual Wobblies are conscious historical agents, their unique approach to recruitment cannot rise above what is possible in the given material conditions. In cities like Kansas City, a place in which the past decade of industrial and population growth had reshaped the cultural and economic landscape, much of the basis for what the IWW needed, specifically the sustained growth of a heterogeneous working-class, was provided. The IWW needed to cast a wide net in Kansas City and needed to capitalize on its monopoly as the only radical labor union in the city in order to avoid isolation and stagnation. The Kansas City Free Speech Fight of 1911 could have only occurred by drawing on the mix of agricultural and industrial

⁹ Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: The Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: International Publishers, 1973).

workers of various skill in Kansas City, and their commitment to opposing “the hired servants of the oppressive class that would stoop to anything”¹⁰ in the form of politicized class struggle.

Through the previous free speech fights the I.W.W. acquired a reputation of using militant action to achieve their aims, a tactical approach referred to as direct action. Direct action, according to the IWW, is the act of “workers acting collectively and democratically to assert their power in the workplace -- as opposed to political action at the ballot box or acting as an armed vanguard seeking to capture state power through force of arms.”¹¹ The local press and authorities often played up the union’s forms of direct action, such as sabotage,¹² in order to depict the IWW as a violent and subversive group bent on causing chaos in the community and economic disruption. Not only did the IWW’s tactics cause alarm in the eyes of the press, but it also caused friction within the radical movement as well. The Socialist Party, a leading organization on the Left in the pre-war years, inserted the now infamous “Article II Section 6” into their constitution in 1914 stating that a party member who “opposes political action or advocates crime,

¹⁰ “I.W.W. Lectures Before the Board.” *Kansas City Journal*, October 19, 1911.

¹¹ Industrial Workers of the World. “Direct Action and Sabotage,” Industrial Workers of the World, <http://www.iww.org/history/icons/sabotage> (accessed October 6th, 2015).

¹² See Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s, “Sabotage, The Conscious Withdrawal of the Workers’ Efficiency,” *I.W.W. Documents Library*, <http://www.iww.org/history/library/Flynn/Sabotage> (accessed October 6th, 2015) for clarification of the term “sabotage” and how it was employed by the I.W.W. as a non-violent display of solidarity and bargaining technique.

sabotage, or other methods of violence as a weapon of the working class...shall be expelled from membership in the party..."¹³ This addition was aimed directly at those within the Socialist Party, and in the national labor movement, who advocated armed revolution, factory occupations, sabotage, and property destruction to achieve social transformation, rather than through the electoral means that the Socialist Party favored.

The campaign of a "free speech fight" embodied this direct action approach. A free speech fight was any campaign of direct action, such as street speaking, strikes, and intentional arrests, that arose in reaction to a violation of the constitutional right of free speech and the union's ability to disseminate their views through literature and speaking. The most violent and famous free speech fights occurred on the West coast in Spokane and San Diego, with San Diego having the most violent reaction to the IWW with lynchings and assaults carried out by civilian gangs against the IWW. The array of tactics employed in a free speech fight all aimed towards the same goal, namely, recognition of the IWW's right to freely assemble and speak without disturbance.

Street speaking and agitation, tactics crucial to the wave of free speech fights between 1909 and 1914, were the main methods of direct action employed during the free speech fight of 1911 in Kansas City. The IWW was not only defending its right to speak on the streets and to propagate their doctrine among the local workers, but also defending their very livelihood. The existence of the IWW was predicated on the ability to disseminate their views publicly, often in a hostile environment, as well as using

¹³ *National Constitution of the Socialist Party* (Chicago: Socialist Party, 1914).

techniques of persuasion and the distribution of literature to bring workers to the union. If the fledgling local was denied this right, then it was robbed of its main recruitment tool, which could have disastrous affects on its ability to continue to exist within Kansas City. As Hugh Scott, a worker and member of Local 61 put it, “We do not fight for free speech because it is in the Constitution of the United States; not on your life. We fight because we need it in our business.”¹⁴

The IWW’s direct action approach alienated the organization from other parties and unions that counted themselves among the ranks of the nation-wide radical labor movement. In Kansas City, the situation was just as acute. Although the local was new, other unions in the city, such as the craft-based Amalgamated Meat Cutters affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, were already naturally hostile to the IWW’s tactics and message. According to Walker C. Smith, a fellow worker and speaker at an IWW event during the free speech fight, “Craft unionism is a failure, but it contains the germ of the one big union idea.”¹⁵ The IWW, unlike the AFL, opposed organizing based solely on craft and made no stipulations regarding membership based on race, religion, or sex. Indeed, from the birth of the IWW animosity had existed between AFL affiliated unions and the IWW From the viewpoint of the AFL, and its leader Samuel Gompers, the IWW

¹⁴ “I.W.W. Promise to Turn Society Over.” *Kansas City Journal*, October 29, 1911.

¹⁵ Ibid.

were an insignificant group of impossibilists¹⁶ that would try to co-opt the AFL from within. In contradistinction, the IWW characterized the AFL as a conciliatory organization composed of reformists bound by the dictates of the Catholic Church.¹⁷

Outside of the large Midwestern cities radicalism took on a distinct appearance compared to the industrial-based radicalism situated in the metropolitan centers. States such as Oklahoma experienced a sizable socialist movement that was able to make significant electoral gains, as well as mobilizing agricultural and industrial workers to fight for reforms. Due to the predominance of agricultural work in the Midwestern states, combined with light industrial sectors such as meatpacking and railroad construction, radical organizations had to unite both types of workers in order to wage a successful struggle. The I.W.W., recognizing the failures of previous revolutionary movements, emphasized establishing a connection between the industrial worker and the agricultural laborer. The union's experience with organizing lumber workers in the Pacific Northwest "...should serve as the key to open the field for the organizing of the farm wage

¹⁶ A term denoting those in the socialist movement who denounced all efforts at reforms as counterproductive and antithetical to the realization of socialism, and therefore advocated a purely revolutionary approach. Daniel De Leon, a fellow traveller of the I.W.W. and leader of the Socialist Labor Party, was the most visible representative of Impossibilism in the United States.

¹⁷ William D. Haywood, "An Appeal for Industrial Solidarity," *International Socialist Review* 14, no. 9 (1914): 545-546.

slaves.”¹⁸ Indeed, the necessity of organizing the farm laborers and uniting them with the industrial workers was a primary concern of the I.W.W. by the second convention held in 1906. The precarious nature of lumber working, in combination with the migratory and unstable nature of the job meant that many workers were thrown out of work at the end of the season. Many laborers “...work as farm hands or in the saw-mills, and many a black-listed mechanic from industrial centers seeks as a last refuge from the master’s persecution employment as a constantly shifting farm laborer and lumberman.”¹⁹

The close proximity of seasonal and migratory agricultural labor in and around Kansas City, to the industrial work centered around the meatpacking and railroad industries, provided fertile ground for the I.W.W. to begin their organizing strategy of uniting the agricultural worker with the industrial worker. Kansas City occupied a unique position as a liminal space within the Midwest that served as a crossroads for a variety of agricultural and industrial occupations. The city itself was the epicenter for these mobile workers. The migratory workforce congregated along what was known as “skid row”, an area located in the City Market, where migratory workers would gather to seek aid from

¹⁸ Industrial Workers of the World, “Proceedings of the Second Convention of the Industrial Workers of the World,” <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/unions/iww/1906/convention/iww.pdf> (accessed October 7, 2015).

¹⁹ Ibid.

the many employment offices concentrated in the area.²⁰ This is the area where the IWW Local 61 concentrated its recruitment efforts, primarily through soapboxing.

Kansas City featured varied productions within light industry such as meatpacking, railroad construction, and garment making. The primary location of Kansas City's industrial sector, known as "Armourdale", contained large-scale factories such as Kansas City Structural Steel and Procter & Gamble. Even larger than the industrial factories of Armourdale was the 207 acre stockyard complex just north of Rosedale, Kansas that served meatpacking giants like Swift's and Armour's.²¹ According to historian Leon Fink this concentration of industry developed due to a combination of geographical and economic factors:

The orientation of Kansas City, Missouri to its western hinterland and railroad connections, together with Kansas's cheap real estate and low taxation, gradually induced city industry to cross the state line. A tiny triangle wedged among the Kansas River, the Missouri state line, and

²⁰ Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 52.

²¹ Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 114.

Kansas City stockyards, the old town of Kansas City, Kansas, was given over to warehouses, workers' tenements, and low-life entertainment.²²

By 1910 the industrial meatpacking industry in Kansas City, on both the Missouri and Kansas sides, had contributed to both ranking in the top five states in overall meat product value. Both state's industries specialized in the slaughtering of beeves and hogs to produce ham, hides, mutton, and fresh beef on the Kansas side, and fresh beef, salted pork, and fresh pork on the Missouri side.²³ With the rapid expansion of Kansas City's population to 248,381 by 1910, a 51.7% leap from ten years previous²⁴, plans were set into motion to construct \$27 million worth of new improvements in industrial and municipal buildings in 1911.²⁵ Consequently, this expansion of the industrial and working-class housing sectors drew many immigrants to an area with a burgeoning commercial industry, with Armour's alone employing around 1,900 workers.²⁶

²² Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 114-115.

²³ U.S. Bureau of the Census. *13th Census of the United States: Manufactures, 1910*. Prepared under the supervision of William M. Steuart. Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1913.

²⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census. *13th Census of the United States: Population, 1910*. Prepared under the supervision of William C. Hunt. Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1913.

²⁵ *Kansas City Star*, January 1, 1911.

²⁶ Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics*, 115.

Kansas City's largely immigrant industrial workforce was one-third first and second-generation immigrant, with another quarter being African-American. Irish-Americans and African-Americans occupied the lowest sections of this workforce, with forty-two percent of the Irish-American workers being unskilled and eighty-six percent of African-American workers being unskilled.²⁷ The Irish-American and African-American workers "occupied the bottom rungs of the labor-force ladder, working as teamsters, porters, hod carriers, and other chore-runner jobs."²⁸

This was all occurring during a period, starting around 1909, that historian James Green referred to as the beginning of the revolution of the "machine proletariat."²⁹ This economic consolidation, driven by rapidly advancing technology and the centralization of production and capital, forced unskilled workers into a quickly ascendant machine industry, which imposed on workers the structures of scientific management and industrial organization. This process had a dual character, according to the IWW. On the one hand, the coercion and naked exploitation inherent in the wage-labor system reproduced alienation and dehumanization, however, the industrial system also

²⁷ Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 27-28.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 28.

²⁹ James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 67.

introduced co-operative labor on a large scale, thus laying the basis for the “co-operative commonwealth” that was to be ushered in by revolutionary industrial unionism.³⁰

During this period of rapid industrial and capital consolidation, progressive reforms, especially in the Western states, attempted to curb the power of business over local and state governments. Kansas City was one of these cities that instituted reforms. However, the effects of progressive reforms often had the opposite effect by actually increasing the power of business through the implemented city-manager system, which was introduced in Kansas City in 1925. Previously, workers, to the dismay of the wealthy classes, would nominate their own representatives in local governments, who would usually side with striking workers against the police.³¹ With the advent of the city-manager system and the system of machine politics, which by 1911 was in its early beginnings with Thomas Pendergast occupying a seat in the city council and controlling many factions with the Jackson County Democratic Party, strengthened the influence and control over local governments by business interests.

The liminal nature of Kansas City as a place where the industrial meets the agricultural provided ample workers for the IWW to recruit. The seasonal and migratory nature of Kansas City’s agricultural work, which centered on crop harvesting, specifically

³⁰ Austin Lewis, *The Militant Proletariat* (Charles H. Kerr Company Cooperative, 1911), 16-18.

³¹ James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth Century America*, 80-81.

wheat, and independent small-scale farming, made many workers receptive to the message of the IWW. Missouri's chief crops were corn, wheat and oats, with most of the workers being tenant farmers, of which 30.7% were white and 41.4% were non-white. Jackson County alone contained 3,380 farms.³²

The nature of Kansas City occupying a boundary zone of labor and migration lent itself to how the union was structured as well. Local 61 was structured as a “mixed local”, meaning that it contained workers from various industries as opposed to a “pure” industrial local. The I.W.W. eventually wanted all “mixed locals” to transition to pure industrial unions once enough workers from a single industry joined, however, many members resisted this approach and some even refused to leave their “mixed locals” even when an industrial local was formed.³³

The ties that bound workers from various agricultural and industrial industries together formed the strength of these “mixed locals”, especially in the smaller cities. Kansas City's lack of radical unionism, coupled with the I.W.W.'s hostility to other unions, made it imperative that Local 61 remain together in order to unite the disparate elements of radicalized workers in the city and surrounding areas. The composition of Local 61 and the environment of Kansas City, were the primary features that allowed the

³² U.S. Bureau of the Census. *13th Census of the United States: Agriculture, 1910*. Prepared under the supervision of Le Grand Powers, John Lee Coulter, and Ray Palmer Teele. Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1913.

³³ Paul Brissenden, *The I.W.W.: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1919).

free speech fight of 1911 to be a success. Other cities where free speech fights were won, such as Fresno and Denver, relied on the strength and unity of their “mixed locals” in order to win. In opposition to what the national organization wanted, more “pure” industrial unions, the successes of locals in the smaller cities and in the Midwest were directly based off of their ability to unify.

Kansas City Local 61 was established in March 1911 and quickly began to apply its tactics of soapboxing and agitation on the streets of the city. In the spring, Local 61 members boarded a streetcar to go “...organize the brickyard slaves, brick haulers, sand haulers, rock workers, lumber handlers and others engaged in making and handling raw building material.”³⁴ Once aboard the streetcar the Wobblies began singing revolutionary songs and were told to immediately cease and desist, a request that they refused. Soon a small crowd collected around the streetcar and the Wobblies began addressing the crowd and their fellow workers. A police officer was drawn to the crowd and informed the Wobblies that they needed to stop speaking or face arrest. Again, they refused and the address continued until one member was arrested, shortly followed by the other speaker upon the arrival of the police wagon. Both members appeared for trial at the South Side Municipal Court on Monday where the judge said that “he never heard of a labor

³⁴ Geo W. Reeder & Tom Halcro, “Try to Crush the I.W.W.” *Industrial Worker*, September 7th, 1911.

organization that sang songs” and promptly fined one worker five dollars while discharging the other.³⁵

That night, Local 61 member A.B. Carson spoke near the branch headquarters at the corner of Missouri Avenue and Main Street. In Carson’s speech to the crowd he accused the judge of stealing the five dollars from the fellow worker and was arrested for disturbing the peace, insulting “Old Glory”, and cursing the police department. Swiftly after his arrest, Carson’s cohort “...took the box and bawled out the flag and police and every other crumb institution but was not molested.”³⁶ Carson was paroled on the condition that he refrain from street speaking for six months, however, the street activities of Local 61 continued throughout the summer and into the fall. The Wobblies continued to be harassed by the police on the pretext that they were using the streets for “private profit” and were obstructing the sidewalks without a proper permit. Many of the Local 61 members pointed out the impossibility of obtaining a speaking permit due to the city only granting them to religious organizations.

As verbal clashes with the police began to build, Local 61 formed a secret committee to speak to the chief of police. The police informed the committee that they could speak as long as they didn’t use language that would “inflame the workers’ minds”, and that they could resume their speaking at Sixth and Main as long as the “business men

³⁵ Geo W. Reeder & Tom Halcro, “Try to Crush the I.W.W.” *Industrial Worker*, September 7th, 1911.

³⁶ Ibid.

did not kick”.³⁷ The Wobblies continued to hold meetings and address workers on the streets without interruption until August 7th. That night at the Local 61 meeting a “supposed stool pigeon” disrupted the soapboxing of a member and was challenged to “take the box and present his argument”. The man proceeded to elbow and shove his way through the crowd to the box amidst a sea of hisses and laughter. After a heated argument between him and the other members he informed the crowd that they would need to obtain a permit to continue their meeting. The agitation committee proceeded to seek out the night chief who accused them of being “socialistic”, to which members of the committee fired back that they were not. The night chief retorted by claiming that they were “too socialistic” and that the police could disrupt or halt their meetings anytime they pleased and stormed back into his office.³⁸

In response, Local 61 abstained from launching an all-out free speech fight immediately, instead opting to observe how the police would treat the I.W.W.’s efforts to further organize and agitate. A letter to the *Industrial Worker* by Local 61 bricklayer and General Executive Board member Tom Halcro, who was also a Rosedale “boomer” that followed work into Kansas City,³⁹ and Geo Reeder, explained the situation brewing in

³⁷ Geo W. Reeder & Tom Halcro, “Try to Crush the I.W.W.” *Industrial Worker*, September 7th, 1911.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928*, 52.

Kansas City and the overflowing tension between the union local and the police. “Now fellow workers, we have done everything possible to avoid a free speech fight, but it seems inevitable. We’ll not make a call for fighters until we have several fellow workers arrested and tried.”⁴⁰ Both the police and Local 61 were doubling down on their efforts. A clear line of conduct and policy had been established for both sides. The clash was about to begin.

The union local and the police maintained an uneasy truce until the night of October 6th when the veteran activist of the Spokane and Fresno free speech fights, and one-armed telegrapher, A. V. Roe, was arrested for street speaking along with three others. The police had struck first. One of the three that was arrested on the corner of 11th and G Street was Max Dezettel, an “organic” local intellectual that ran a local Marxist study group on political economy, and a leader that was instrumental in the ideological education and radicalization of new recruits. Both Dezettel and Halcro were responsible for bringing James P. Cannon, who would by the 1930s be the world’s leading Trotskyist outside of Trotsky himself, into the fold of the IWW, and in fact he experienced his first taste of revolutionary politics during the Free Speech Fight of 1911.⁴¹

According to Dr. E. A. Burkhardt, a local physician and outspoken defender of the I.W.W.’s right to public speech, Roe “...had about a dozen witnesses to testify that he

⁴⁰ Geo W. Reeder & Tom Halcro, “Try to Crush the I.W.W.” *Industrial Worker*, September 7th, 1911.

⁴¹ Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928*, 53-54.

was violating no law” but his witnesses “...were given no opportunity to testify”.⁴² Burkhardt took a cautious and conciliatory attitude, citing the experience of the Spokane free speech fight and the \$150,000 that it cost the city as a situation to be avoided in Kansas City. Burkhardt went further by claiming that the local suppression of the I.W.W. was nothing more than sitting on “the safety valve of free speech”, which would lead to no other outcome than “igniting an explosion”, echoing the “bloody revolution in miniature” that was set off in Spokane.⁴³ Complaints from the local business community became more prevalent, citing the street meetings as gatherings that “disturbed the peace” and “obstructed the sidewalks” in the River Market, thus deterring potential customers and disrupting business. Local 61 blamed the increasing frequency of arrests on the pressure put on the police by local “capitalists, who are just beginning to realize that we may organize one great union and put them to work.”⁴⁴

The local press, influenced by the business community, viewed the I.W.W. as a threat to “law and order” in the city, but many within the press, police force, and business community were reminded of a recent local tragedy that was sparked by similar street speaking. On December 8th, 1908 police were investigating a possible child abduction and their prime suspect was a local street preacher named James Sharp, a man who

⁴² E. H. Burkhardt, “Free Speech Fight Is On In Kansas City” *Industrial Worker*, October 26, 1911.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “I.W.W. Promise To Turn Society Over,” *Kansas City Journal*, October 29th, 1911.

believed he was the father of Jesus Christ and assumed the moniker of “Adam God”. A large crowd of Sharp’s followers had gathered at Fifth and Main to listen to his sermon, when Sharp then proceeded to club a policeman with his pistol when the officer questioned the woman soliciting donations from the crowd on behalf of Sharp. Within a short time the situation devolved into a riot, which left five people dead and three wounded.⁴⁵

The fact that many of Local 61’s street gatherings occurred one block away from where a violent riot happened almost three years previous, proved both worrisome and convenient to the police and local business community. Police Chief W. E. Griffin was of the opinion that if the street meetings were allowed to continue then “...before winter is over you will see something worse than the Adam God riot right here on this North Side.”⁴⁶ The residual memory of the Adam God riot fueled concerns over “outsiders” and “fanatics” stirring up local residents with fiery speeches to large crowds in public spaces, however, it also proved to be an important historical memory to leverage for the purpose of eliminating political opponents rather than merely enforcing public safety. The police, business community, and the press were willing to invoke the memory of the Adam God riot to turn local opinion against the I.W.W. in an effort to silence the organizational efforts of Local 61.

⁴⁵ Joplin Globe, “The Cult Leader Who Called Joplin Home,” Historic Joplin, <http://www.historicjoplin.org/?tag=adam-god> (accessed October 29th, 2015).

⁴⁶ “Police Are Accused,” *Kansas City Journal*, October 19th, 1911.

The disruptions continued, and on the night of October 14th police raided an open-air meeting at Sixth and Main, due to a complaint from a local barber, and arrested the nationally known Wobbly orator, Frank Little. Outside of William “Big Bill” Haywood, Frank Little was the I.W.W.’s most prolific organizer and speaker, as well as a veteran of the Fresno and Missoula free speech fights. The arrest of Little signaled the true beginning of the Kansas City free speech fight. His previous arrests in Fresno and Missoula served as the spark that ignited those campaigns, and so would his arrest in Kansas City. With Little in handcuffs, the police quickly demanded to know if any leaders were present, as they would be subject to arrest as well. One of Little’s fellow Wobblies promptly informed the officers that the I.W.W. had no leaders, to which the officers responded that membership alone was enough to subject someone to arrest. Everyone that dared to admit membership was then summarily arrested and hauled off to jail.⁴⁷ According to Chief Griffin, “those men must go either to jail or out of the city.”⁴⁸ In an effort to further connect the I.W.W. with violence and disorder Griffin stated that “I am having their record in other cities investigated and I understand they were responsible for the murder last January of a captain of police in Spokane, Washington.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ “Telegram”, *Industrial Worker*, October 19th, 1911.

⁴⁸ “Fears A Clash With Police,” *Kansas City Star*, October 19th, 1911.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

After spending a night in jail, Little along with seven other members that were arrested, were sent to the Northside Municipal Court to appear before judge Clarence A. Burney. The eight Wobblies stood before the judge and listened to “a cockroach businessman telling... that he thought that a copy of E. S. Nelson’s ‘Appeal to Wage Workers’ ... was all the evidence needed to convict of disturbing the peace.”⁵⁰ As the seven other Wobblies stood before the court in silent defiance, Little requested a proper jury trial from judge Burney. Burney replied, “I know what you men want and I don’t want to be bothered with you this winter, and I am not going to stand for any stump speeches.”⁵¹

The result was an informal hearing during which twenty I.W.W. witnesses were presented, but none were allowed to speak. Instead judge Burney read aloud from the only permitted evidence submitted by the city, the pamphlet *Appeal to Wage Workers*. Burney questioned Nelson on the meaning and purpose of direct action as advocated in the pamphlet, to which he was given the explanation that workers were not bound to produce any more wealth than was necessary for the employing class. The prosecuting attorney, having heard the reasoning, proclaimed that Nelson had never done a day’s work in his life and got his earnings from the working class, to which Nelson replied that the prosecuting attorney obtained his earnings from the same source. By then the

⁵⁰ G. H. Perry, “Free Speech Fight Is On In Kansas City” *Industrial Worker*, October 26th, 1911.

⁵¹ Ibid.

prosecuting attorney and judge Burney had had enough of Little and Nelson's explanations and fined Little \$25.00 and the seven others \$10.00.⁵²

The fines were to be worked off at fifty cents a day at the Leeds Farm through hard labor. Once word got out that Little and the others had been sentenced and fined, local members confronted judge Burney. They made him aware that if those men were to remain at Leeds Farm, then Kansas City would be facing a free speech fight similar to the ones in Fresno and Spokane. Burney decided to back off and waived the fines of everyone except Little, believing that keeping the "leader" in jail would allow for a quieter unfolding of events. With Little still in jail, Vincent St. John, the national secretary, sent out a telegram informing all I.W.W. locals of the events unfolding in Kansas City. While St. John could make a call for willing workers to travel to Kansas City, neither he nor the national leadership could fund or organize the struggle. That would be up to Local 61.⁵³

The strategy chosen by a committee of members, and presented by former secretary Don Scott, reflected what had worked previously in Spokane, Missoula, and Fresno. Scott, citing his belief that 5,000 workers would be available to aid in Kansas City, stated that meetings would continue to be held regardless of how many Wobblies

⁵² Tom M. McInnis, "Kansas City Free Speech Fight of 1911" *Missouri Historical Review Vol. 84* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990).

⁵³ Brissenden, Paul, *The I.W.W.: A Study of American Syndicalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1919) 261.

were arrested, and that more would come to fill their place. As for those arrested, “we will fill the city jails to overflowing, and we will stay there until the city grows tired of the expense of caring for us.”⁵⁴ Scott further elaborated by saying that those arrested will refuse to pay any fines and will continue to crowd the jails until it becomes “...too great for the municipality to bear.”⁵⁵ He was confident that the two hundred members across the mixed local No. 61 and the smaller garment workers local No. 191 were capable of winning. At a small protest after the imprisonment of Little, a speaker made the Wobblies’ intents known to the crowd. “We will fill all the jails, all the holdovers. Then, too, we shall obtain a firmer grip on public sentiment, which always swings in the side of the oppressed.”⁵⁶ The speaker was careful to reiterate the Local’s position on a non-violent approach as a warning and counter to Chief Griffin’s violent characterization of the organization. “Let us not add strength to the cause of our prosecutors by physical violence. Let us get public sympathy on our side and we will win.”⁵⁷ The tactics were clear; drain the city financially until the taxpaying citizens demanded an end to the jailings, and capture public sympathy by resisting oppression and injustice nonviolently.

⁵⁴ “Free Speech Fight On” *Industrial Worker*, October 26th, 1911.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ “Blithely They Go To Jail,” *Kansas City Star*, October 24th, 1911.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

The police responded differently. On October 18th the Board of Police Commissioners held an open hearing where I.W.W. defenders and local police were allowed to voice their opinions on the recent trouble between the local and the city. Dr. E. A. Burkhardt appeared publicly at the hearing and presented his impartial defense of the I.W.W., which he felt had been treated unjustly by the police department. Burkhardt reiterated what many members had been saying for days, that police targeted the I.W.W. for their message, not any violation of the law. He noted that the night of October 6th, when Roe and others were arrested, that "...a few blocks further away policemen in great numbers walked back and forth and kept the way open while a great crowd gathered in front of a building watching a baseball score."⁵⁸ Further presenting his case for discrimination against the I.W.W. by local officials, Burkhardt stated, "every night the Salvation Army is permitted to parade the streets with brass bands and to gather crowds, and others do the same. Yet they are not arrested and these men are."⁵⁹

A. V. Roe echoed the same sentiment when he presented in front of the board, as well as informing the commissioners that the police had confiscated I.W.W. literature unlawfully. Police Chief Griffin told the board that the I.W.W.'s literature and paraphernalia was "incendiary and shall not be sold or distributed upon the streets of

⁵⁸ "I.W.W. Lectures Before The Board," *Kansas City Journal*, October 19th, 1911.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Kansas City.”⁶⁰, as well as stating that the I.W.W. opposed capital, the church, labor, law, order, the Bible, and the “dove of peace”. Commissioner Theodore Ripley then recounted his testimony regarding the I.W.W. to those present, but directed a warning specifically to Roe. “You came here inviting a row and from your talk you seem determined to get it. I want to tell you that if you do not obey the ordinance of this city you will get just what you appear to be seeking.”⁶¹

In the final comments at the hearing Mayor Brown informed everyone present, “If these men came here to speak on the streets and obey the law, I have no objections. But if they are here for the purpose of defying the police power and try to override all law they are going to be arrested whenever they offend.”⁶² Commissioner Ripley and Senator Gillmore concurred with the mayor’s proposal and agreed to leave the situation entirely in the hands of Chief Griffin as a solution. Griffin had already proven his stated desire to remove the I.W.W. from the city by any means necessary, whether by force or slander. With the reigns of power and decision making securely in the hands of Chief Griffin, combined with the I.W.W.’s willingness to carry the fight forward until the bitter end, the stage was set for a battle between two unrelenting forces to see who would “run” Kansas City.

⁶⁰ “Saturday Night In Kansas City,” *Industrial Worker*, November 2, 1911.

⁶¹ “I.W.W. Lectures Before The Board,” *Kansas City Journal*, October 19th, 1911.

⁶² *Ibid.*

On October 23rd Local 61's committee sent a telegram to the *Industrial Worker* describing the necessity of carrying out the free speech fight in earnest. "They are arresting every member in sight. Send men in at once. They claim they have lots of room here for the I.W.W. We must fight to the finish."⁶³ With the call sent out to all the locals nationwide, Local 61 was confident that Kansas City would soon become a "storm center" similar to Spokane and Fresno. The local press showed a growing concern at the commitment of Local 61 and its ability to win the fight. "If the Industrial Workers of the World do what they say they are going to do, they will capture Kansas City before the winter is over."⁶⁴ When interviewed about the incoming reinforcements, a member of Local 61 stated "They've begun to get in already. They'll be dropping in every day now. But we're not putting all of our available men on the street, however. We're going to have a systematic fight, and what's more, we're going to win it."⁶⁵

The foot soldiers arriving were eager to participate in the fight and showed no signs of trepidation, as evidenced by one man's enthusiasm when interviewed. "Afraid of getting arrested? Hardly! We want to get arrested."⁶⁶ "Loyal" members had traveled far and wide, from St. Louis to London, in order to get arrested for the cause of free speech. The influx of Wobblies necessitated a response from Chief Griffin. Griffin, at the counsel

⁶³ "On To Kansas City," *Industrial Worker*, November 2nd, 1911.

⁶⁴ "I.W.W. To 'Besiege' City," *Kansas City Times*, October 25th, 1911.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ "Not Jails Enough For Them," *Kansas City Times*, October 24th, 1911.

of W. J. Doust, the police chief of Spokane, was advised to arrest as many of the I.W.W. leaders as possible to avoid major costs to the city and to stop the situation from spiraling out of control. The nature of arresting and trying an ever-increasing number of Wobblies soon became a hindrance to Griffin's attempt to eliminate the I.W.W. from the streets of Kansas City. Assistant City Counselor John Mathias and Chief Griffin would go straight to the source of the I.W.W., its headquarters at 211 E. Missouri Avenue. Mathias' plan was to contact the owner of the property and immediately have the I.W.W. evicted from the premises. Without a central and permanent meeting location, the I.W.W. would be deprived of the necessary means to organize and contact reinforcements. Mathias even went so far as to commit to pursuing I.W.W. members through further evictions if necessary. "As fast as the so-called workers find other places to meet I shall have the premises vacated by the owners."⁶⁷ Chief Griffin went further by stating, "...if Mr. Mathias does not succeed in having the headquarters of the organization vacated I will find a way."⁶⁸

The incoming reinforcements had caused the city to stiffen its approach in handling the I.W.W. The constant threat of Wobblies pouring into the city was unsettling to the police and business community. Chief Griffin vowed to continue his efforts at arresting as many Wobblies as possible "as long as there are objections from the men

⁶⁷ "The Headquarters To Be Closed," *Kansas City Star*, October 24th, 1911.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

conducting business there.”⁶⁹ The situation at Leeds farm was also concerning leaders in the city, due to their fear that mixing the Wobblies with other prisoners would lead to the propagation of radical ideas amongst the inmates. The president of the Public Welfare Board, Charles Mill, believed that it “was absolutely necessary to segregate these men from the regular prisoners at Leeds farm.”⁷⁰ Mill, believing that many of the I.W.W inmates would strike and refuse to work, threatened that anyone who did not comply would be subject to a steady diet of “bread and water”, just as in Spokane. Rather than completely abstaining from work, several of the Wobbly prisoners decided to give a dose of direct action to the workhouse in the form of a general strike. The continuing agitation within the workhouse prompted Chief Griffin and Charles Mill to create a special rock pile that Wobbly prisoners would break up for the profit of the city to pay off their debts.⁷¹

The continuing arrests, incoming reinforcements, and general excitement surrounding the I.W.W.’s battle with the city proved beneficial to the union. A member of Local 61 noted, “Since the police began to arrest us, the attendance at our meetings has been growing. Lots of people now hear what we have to say while they are waiting to see

⁶⁹ “Because The Merchants Object,” *Kansas City Star*, October 25th, 1911.

⁷⁰ “A Special Jail For I.W.W.,” *Kansas City Star*, October 25th, 1911.

⁷¹ “Private Rock Pile,” *Kansas City Journal*, October 25th, 1911.

the police come along and arrest us.”⁷² The increase in attendance was evident on the night of October 24th, when a crowd of between two hundred and four hundred people gathered at Sixth and Main to listen to a speech by local Wobbly secretary Don Scott.

The speech started at 7:30 p.m. and by 7:40 p.m. it was all over. Looking out over the crowd, many wearing their badges that read “Free Speech for Kansas City”, Scott began to speak. He told the crowd that the I.W.W. aimed to organize all workers into one big union, and that because the police, who are servants of capital, oppose this they are arrested for speaking. This was enough for the patrolmen watching the meeting. Four of them “rushed” Scott and the other speakers and handcuffed them. The crowd erupted into roar of cheers and shouts as the men were dragged back through the crowd towards the jail. As the patrolmen passed, a spectator of short stature wearing glasses jumped into the street shouting, “Wait a minute fellow workingmen, this meeting isn’t over.” The man continued, “We, the workingmen, built the jails and we, the workingmen, will live in the jails.”⁷³ Before the man could continue addressing the crowd a patrolman interrupted, “All right, come on. Your room is ready.”⁷⁴ The crowd exploded in another bout of cheers.

⁷² “Attendance Grows,” *Kansas City Journal*, October 25th, 1911.

⁷³ “Arrested 8 For Crying Shame,” *Kansas City Times*, October 25th, 1911.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

The following morning the six men arrested the previous night appeared before judge Charles Clark. All of them refused to take the oath and were refused a proper jury trial. Clark fined them all \$500, to which the six men smiled and responded, “Thank you, judge; that’s what we want.” Judge Clark retaliated at their sarcastic tone “I’m sorry that I can’t make it \$5,000.”⁷⁵ The growing number of prisoners filling the holdovers and Leeds farm was beginning to cause concern for city officials as to whether the city could hold out against the I.W.W. Public Welfare president Charles Mill soon eased those fears by making it known that he had a “list of a number of buildings in the city where these men can be kept if the police arrest them.”⁷⁶ If the extra buildings proved insufficient, the Public Welfare Board would construct stockades for the prisoners to further segregate them from the general population, as well as make them work longer hours to increase profits for the city. Mill stated, “We need all the broken stone we can get. We are building a number of concrete buildings at the farm and use the broken rock in this work. We also need a lot of the same material for building roads.”⁷⁷ Mill’s call for stockades proved problematic for the board, which worried that the prisoners would be subjected to working and sleeping in the cold. The purpose of Leeds farm and penal labor, according to the Public Welfare Board, was to reform prisoners while providing a financial service to the city, not barbaric punishment.

⁷⁵ “No Fines Paid To K.C.,” *Industrial Worker*, November 9th, 1911.

⁷⁶ “Plenty of Prison Room For I.W.W.,” *Kansas City Journal*, October 26th, 1911.

⁷⁷ “Make Them Break Stone,” *Kansas City Journal*, October 26th, 1911.

It was clear that the city was willing to expand its efforts by any means necessary to combat the I.W.W., while the union seemed to be able to rely on an unending stream of fighters. Both sides had reached a standstill. The I.W.W. sent Walker C. Smith, a former tailor, to Kansas City to make and distribute ten thousand proclamations throughout the city, informing the citizens how much the fight was costing them in taxes. The estimates were based on what it cost the taxpayers of Spokane, Missoula, and Fresno. In the opinion of the I.W.W. gaining public sympathy and fomenting outrage at the financial cost of the fight would be what would break the stalemate. The local, at the behest of their free speech fight committee decided to avoid meeting at 211 E. Missouri Avenue in case of a police raid, in which case all of their materials would be lost. The police, taking the advice of I.W.W. national secretary Vincent St. John, settled on not arresting any more Wobblies unless they explicitly broke the law.

On October 27th Local 61 tested their ability to speak once more. The street meeting started at Sixth and Main, and encouraged by the speaker, moved from block to block singing songs from the *Little Red Song Book*. None were arrested. The following day, October 28th, Wobblies Smith and Halcro met with the Public Welfare Board and Chief Griffin to discuss the parole of the inmates imprisoned at Leeds farm. The result of the meeting was that “the I.W.W. can speak on any corner in Kansas City, without securing a permit of any kind, where such meetings will not endanger the life and

limb of passerby and where no valid objections are raised abutting property owners.”⁷⁸

The next day the Public Welfare Board sent a letter to Chief Griffin, Judge Burney, and Assistant City Counselor Mathias informing them of the agreement between the board and Smith and Halcro. If no officials raised objections within twenty-four hours, the right to free speech was secured. All imprisoned Wobblies were paroled on November 2nd and headed straight for the local union hall for a victory banquet.

Although 1911 marked a watershed victory for the IWW in Kansas City, the police would again challenge the IWW’s right to street speak in 1914. This led to another free speech fight, although this one lacked the publicity, fanfare, and duration of its predecessor. While the free speech fight of 1914 was not as significant as the free speech fight of 1911, both campaigns, with their ability to mobilize local workers and garner sympathy from local professionals and taxpayers, proved that Kansas City housed a subterranean militant labor radicalism that was slowly beginning to boil over. This emergent radical epicenter in the heart of the prairielands culminated in Kansas City serving as the host city for the founding convention of the Agricultural Workers Organization, an ambitious effort to organize all Midwestern harvest workers under the umbrella of the IWW.⁷⁹ The AWO represented the quintessential IWW strategy and the overarching desire for the unification of agricultural and industrial workers that had

⁷⁸ “Kansas City Has Been Placed On The Map,” *Industrial Worker*, November 9th, 1911.

⁷⁹ Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: The Industrial Workers of the World*, 474-475.

driven the IWW since their founding, and especially their work in Kansas City. This conference was organized and called by Local 61, proving that they had earned enough clout through two successive struggles in Kansas City among labor radicals, to put Kansas City on the map as a destination for Midwestern organizing. The IWW could have picked Chicago, a much larger city, and one well known for its history of labor radicalism and industrial unionism, but the practical experience of Local 61 and the strategic geographic location of Kansas City as a cultural and economic crossroads cemented its status as the preeminent and unique center of labor radicalism in the Midwest.

The Free Speech Fight that occurred in the fall of 1911 based itself on embracing the commonality of class and securing guaranteed political freedoms for tactical ends, funneled into directly into a political cause. The union included bricklayers, railroad workers, meatpackers, garment workers, harvest laborers, farm hands, and the unemployed, all united around a single cause and directed by local rank and file leadership. The I.W.W.'s insistence on approaching the struggle with the tactical approach of non-violent direct action proved much more suited to the small-scale struggle that unfolded in Kansas City. Lacking manpower and resources, the Kansas City I.W.W. had to rely on winning the favor of the public rather than employing more militant actions such as the minor property damage and theatrical reenactments of imprisonment that occurred in San Diego and Spokane. Because of these conditions, Local 61 realized the I.W.W.'s goal of uniting agricultural laborers and industrial workers through sheer

necessity. If the disparate workers of varying occupations, produced by the industrial make-up of the city, were not united, and instead divided by trade into unions, as the national leadership desired, there would have been no possibility for victory.

Furthermore, the IWW's victory, much like its free speech victories in other cities like Spokane and Fresno, required a mobilization and radicalization of the "militant" migrants. Kansas City, as a Midwestern industrial and agricultural production center, provided the basis for this by drawing migrants and the lowest and most downtrodden sections of the working class to its industrial and agricultural production sites, which the IWW successfully recruited from. Unlike other free speech fights, the one in Kansas City, although hard-fought, involved no violence perpetrated by either side which was primarily a result of the successful mobilization drive enacted by Local 61 and the continuous stream of migrant workers into the city.

In the end, the position of Kansas City as a cultural and industrial crossroads helped the union by forcing it to unite workers along class line rather than around common moral, religious, or Jeffersonian teachings. Standing in the tradition of Midwestern radicalism, and basing itself on a union between industrial and agricultural workers, the I.W.W. embraced this in Kansas City and ended up victorious. Workers from various professions answered the call and traveled from across the country to come to the I.W.W.'s aid in Kansas City. They united successfully with the garment makers, harvest workers, meatpackers, railroad workers, unemployed, and farm hands that called

Local 61 home, and showed the public and the city the power of a labor radicalism unique to Kansas City.

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