

## **Labor History: The Spokane Free Speech Fight**

*By Ed Leavy*

The study of labor history is an exercise in finding hope. It is difficult for me to watch the news today and not be discouraged at the hatred and contempt being heaped on those among us who struggle the most – the poor, the immigrant, the refugee. All the rules are stacked against their success, but when they fail to beat those incredible odds they are dismissed as sycophants and losers. If they start to succeed anyway, the rules get changed to make it even harder for them. Labor history teaches us that this is nothing new, that a century ago these same fights were fought. People of conscience stood together, they showed unity and courage, and they built a vibrant middle class for working people. We are watching what they build being dismantled today, but that process is not inevitable. The Spokane Free Speech movement is an example of how people refused to let a corrupt system beat them.

Spokane, Washington was a thriving city in 1909, at least for business owners. Logging and construction companies benefited from the construction boom throughout the West. On Stevens Street, thousands of people – primarily the poor and immigrant – gathered looking for work every day. A series of businesses sprang up that were precursors to the modern employment agencies. Called “job sharks,” they would charge people \$1 (the equivalent of nearly \$25 today) to be hired on a crew. The logging or construction company, who worked with and sometimes employed the job shark, would let the person work a day or two and then replace him with someone else the job shark brought them. The Somers Lumber Company, for example, used a rotating group of 3000 men to staff a crew of 50 workers, with every change bringing in an extra \$1 from the job shark they hired. With wages so low, it was impossible for workers to survive in this system.

In the early fall of 1909, James Walsh from the International Workers of the World, better known as the Wobblies, arrived in Spokane. He began turning the anger of the workers into an organized movement; in more than one instance, he prevented an angry mob from destroying the employment agency and convinced the people to join the IWW instead. The Spokane civic leaders, worried that workers might join together rather than fight one another, passed prohibitions on organized public speaking. At first, the IWW agreed, and held their meetings in a union hall. When the city made an exception for the Salvation Army however – it seemed the City would decide who would get to speak publically and who would not – the Wobblies reacted. Migrant workers were returning from the fall harvest, and the streets were again filled with job seekers. The Wobblies decided they would ignore the law, and on November 2 the battle began.

Walsh stood on a wood carton and began speaking to the workers, telling them to refuse to go to the job sharks. He was quickly arrested for violating the city ordinance on public speaking. As the police took him to jail, another speaker took his place until he was arrested. This process continued speaker after speaker, day after day. Soon Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a pregnant 19-year-old organizer from the Bronx, chained herself to a pole next to the carton and began to speak.

The labor movement, then and now, is filled with tough and intelligent women who refuse to take a step backwards. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn is not only an example of this type of woman, she is a prototype. By the age of 19 she had been kicked out of high school for her involvement in politics (women did not have the right to vote yet), organized iron worker in Minnesota, and been arrested for her union activities. She had already stated, “I will devote my life to the wage earner. My sole aim in life is to do all in my power to right the wrongs and lighten the burdens of the laboring class.” In Spokane, she did just that. After the police cut her chains and arrested her, she spent several days in jail. Once released, she wrote several articles for the IWW newsletter describing the terrible conditions in the jail, and the beatings that the Wobblies were

receiving. She described how the women's cells were being used as brothels; prostitutes were arrested, but ended up just working for the police.

The police reacted as one would expect; they doubled their attacks and tried to suppress the stories. Eight IWW editors were arrested before Flynn herself was able to publish her stories. The articles spread throughout the country, although Police Captain John T. Sullivan ordered a door-to-door search to confiscate the newsletters. Smith publically bragged that he gave the prisoners only bread and water on Thanksgiving, and that "hoboes and radicals" did not deserve civil rights. The situation had caught the attention of the country, however. Other unions and the press supported the effort of the IWW. Ultimately, the city had to relent. On March 4, the laws against public speaking were rescinded, and the job sharks were largely shut down. Flynn dedicated herself to union work and progressive politics until her death in 1964.

At a recent SEBAC meeting, the head of Council 4 AFSCME Sal Luciano said, "Things aren't the way they are because of an act of God. Things got this way because people passed rules to protect their own self-interest, and we didn't stop them." The Spokane Free Speech Fight shows what happens when people have the courage to stand up for what they know is right, and are willing to accept the sacrifices needed to create change. No one gives up power willingly; it must be seized through courage and organization. The Spokane fight should be a source of hope and inspiration today.

*This article is based on a number of internet sites, including [HistoryLink.org](http://HistoryLink.org).*