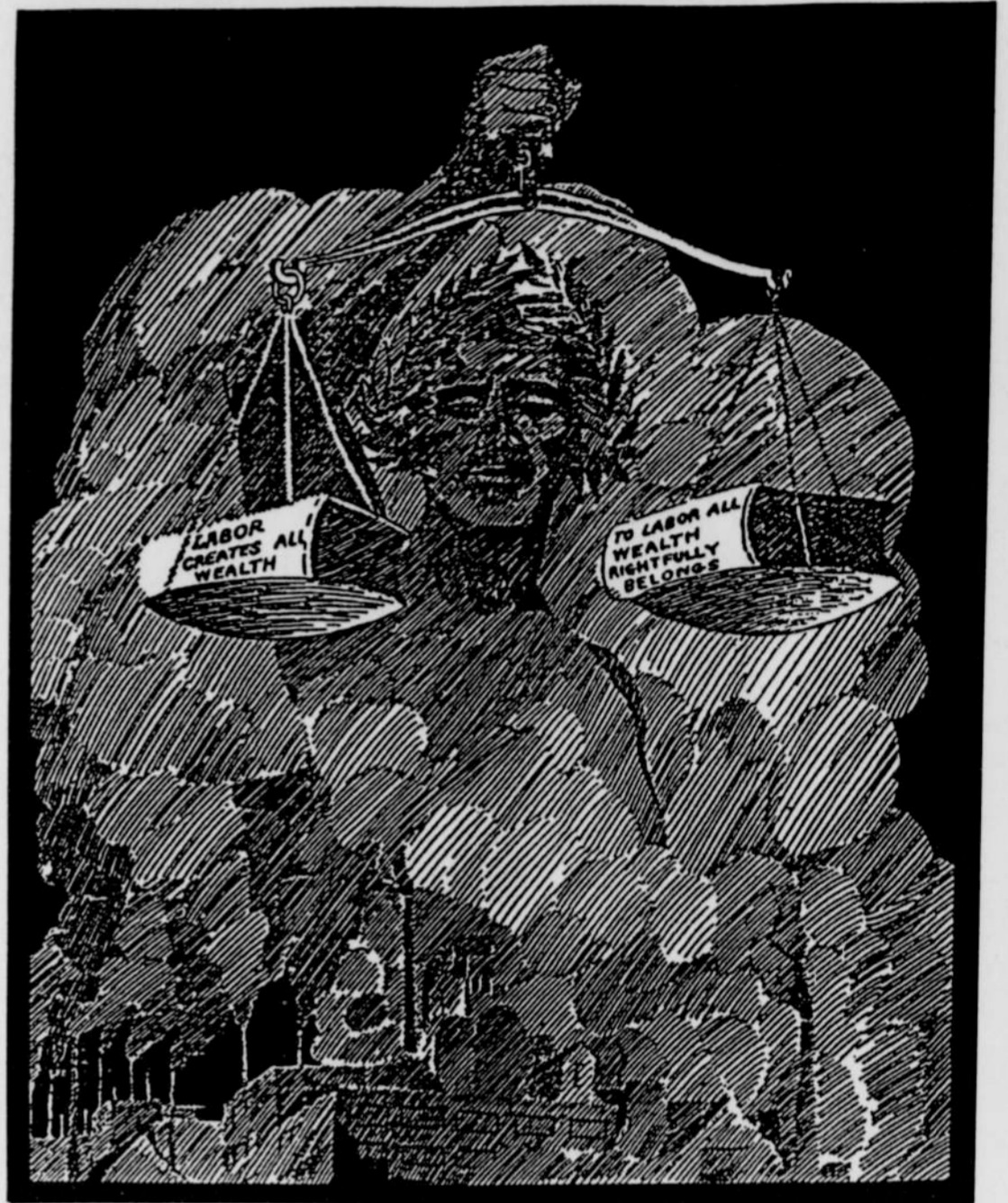


THE SWEAT & BLOOD OF LABOR

BY JULIA RUUTTILA

The preamble to the Industrial Workers of the World constitution declares that labor and management have nothing common. The history of labor in the Pacific Northwest is as torturous as its geography. Much of it is buried in forgotten graves or in the backstages of used bookstores and libraries. Julia Ruuttila was part of that history for more than 60 years, since she was a child passing out IWW leaflets. She was a small, quietly spoken woman who served on countless picketlines and in as many defense committees for jailed union men and women. She was arrested often and the victim of labor violence. She wrote for the union press for more than half a century.

—MICHAEL McCUSKER



INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

It has become popular for universities and historical societies to collect labor documents, even to squabble over who gets what. Invariably, the sought after records reflect events long past, no longer controversial or likely to endanger the economic establishment's net take, coined now as always from the sweat and blood of labor.

Several years ago an acquisitions struggle took place over the "Free Ray Becker" files. These documents concerned a post-World War 1 labor frame and efforts of the Woodworkers Union to get the last of the Centralia defendants out of prison.¹ As the sole surviving member of the "Free Ray Becker" committee, I was surprised to learn that the Universities of Oregon and Washington and the Oregon Historical Society had come to value America's "other history."

I assumed that the Centralia case (which in its ramifications, tragedy and horror outranks the Mooney case, the Sacco and Vanzetti case, and even some of those described in C. Osborne Ward's, *The American Lowly*) would soon be written up in student dissertations and papers. Yet in the 10 years the Ray Becker files and part of the old Centralia Defense Committee files were either on loan deposit with the University of Washington or (as they now are) in the permanent archives of the Oregon Historical Society, not one history professor mentioned them in class nor did any academic figure² delve into that dark story of frameup, torture, official coverup, intimidation of jurors and wholesale subornation of perjury.

It has been 84 years* since a Lewis County lumber tycoon met with American Legion brass and Chamber of Commerce types to plan a raid on a workers' hall in Centralia. It has been 84 years since the last contingent in an Armistice Day parade, armed with ropes, clubs and guns, broke ranks to smash in the hall door, killing a member of their own raiding party by mistake in the excitement. And it has been 84 years since the bullet-ridden body of Wesley Everest dangled from the Chehalis River Bridge, and since the coroner of Lewis County cut off his balls as a souvenir of the lynch party in which he and others (their names are in the files) participated on November 11, 1919.

Almost 84 years have elapsed since the lawyer who was to act as special prosecutor at the trial of Everest's jailed companions killed one of them under third degree interrogation, and since the body was incinerated in the sawdust burner at Hubbard's Mill.

It is 83 years since troopers were encamped on the courthouse lawn in Montesano, and since a bailiff took word into the jury of what would happen to them if they returned any verdict other than guilty.

The Centralia case still seems to be a hot potato.

Is this because the frameup and its official coverup reached so deeply into the political and economic structure of the Sawdust Belt?

Papers were presented at a labor history conference I attended some years ago on "Black Miners & the Knights of Labor in the Washington Coal Fields", "The 1934 Portland Longshore Strike", "Father Edwin O'Hara & the Origins of Minimum Wage Legislation in Oregon", "Harry Wicks & William Dunn: The Boy Bolsheviks", "Lumber Technology & Violence in the West Coast Forests", and "Immigrant Workers & Community Power in Astoria, Oregon, Circa 1880-1900".

Most of the papers reflected careful research and sincere interest in working class history. But there was no paper on the Centralia case.

During more than 60 years in the labor movement I have never ceased to marvel over why it takes friends and colleagues of frameup victims so long to grasp what is going on, to figure out who is doing the "conspiring", and who is responsible for the violence mentioned so glibly in the indictments.

Frameup has been used since ancient times to keep political dissenters and advocates of peace and bread for the masses in their place.

When I was a child, Flora Freeman, a teacher in Tillamook, was sent to federal prison for telling her students that World War 1 was not a war for democracy. The munitions makers who coined millions from that war were not jailed. Nor

was General Douglas MacArthur, who sent helmeted soldiers and horse troops to lob teargas into the pitiful packing box community of World War 1 veterans, the "Bonus Army" at Anacosta Flats in Washington, D.C.

One of the Anacosta victims was an infant of 11 weeks. Flora Freeman contracted tuberculosis in her damp prison cell.

Doctor Marie Equi, a remarkable woman whose life spanned many of the heroic events in the untold story of Northwest labor was sent to San Quentin for agitating against the same war. A celebrated physician whose agile brain had no difficulty grasping the implications of history on the hoof, Equi used her medical skill to help the victims of the Everett Massacre³. She adopted the orphaned daughter of Wesley Everest, impaled a policeman with a hatpin on a cannery workers' picketline when these women were about to be charged by horsecops, and sent money to the families gunned down by policemen at Pier Park in San Francisco during the famous 1934 Maritime Strike.^{**}

She also shinned up a telephone pole on 4th Avenue in the Portland Free Speech Fight after friends of the Wobblies (IWW) had been yanked off the soapbox and flung into the paddy wagon. She scaled the pole with the aid of spurs borrowed from a telephone company lineman, one of her many admirers in the working class. It took city fire department smoke-eaters so long to get her down (they too admired her) that she alone of the free speech activists was able to finish her remarks.

One of the labor leaders who worked to get Equi out of San Quentin was Otto Hartwig, a member of the Painters' Union, who met her when he was doing some redecorating in the medical building where she had offices.

Hearing a commotion on the floor above, Hartwig dashed up the stairs to find Equi telling off a colleague who had refused to make a housecall on a desperately ill child of a poor family in St. John.

Although he ranks as a conservative in the labor movement, Hartwig, who later became secretary of the State Federation of Labor, not only had considerable understanding of labor's immediate needs⁴, but a perceptive sense of history on the hoof.

When a former Portlander, Louise Bryant, wife of John Reed, also from Portland and author of *Ten Days That Shook The World*, had returned from Russia to plead for nonintervention in the workers' and peasants' revolution, it was Hartwig

who presided over the meeting. It was held in the Portland Civic Auditorium and jammed to the rafters with people eager to hear what Bryant had to say.

Workers in both Oregon and Washington seemed to have been fired by the winds of change sweeping off the Russian steppes. Perhaps because so many of them had come to this country to escape famine and pestilence in the cities of Europe and from enforced service in the armies of the Czar.

In Seattle, longshoremen refused to load arms for the White General Kolchak. This happened in September 1918, when the Soviets were fighting against foreign intervention on 17 fronts. The dockers became suspicious when a mysterious shipment arrived by rail — 50 boxcars with crates marked "sewing machines" consigned to Vladivostok. A longshoreman opened one of the crates: it was filled with rifles.

United States interference in the efforts of the have-nots in other lands to throw off their chains was going on then just as it was to go on later in Vietnam and Cambodia, and—in a subtler form — against the Popular Unity Government in Chile in 1973 and against the people of Nicaragua and El Salvador. Major General Smedley Butler, former Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps and one of only two men to win the Congressional Medal of Honor twice, said of his 30 years with the USMC:

"I spent most of my time being a high-class muscleman for Big Business."

There were many Russians and Finns in Oregon in the early 1900s. Finland at that time was a grand duchy of the Czar. When the cry of "Bread, Peace, Land" rang over the Black Sea and the Volga Basin, the eyes of Finnish and Russian families turned with tears of joy toward their homelands. There is proof of this in the old cemeteries where these people are buried. In an old graveyard in north Portland, bounded by the freeway and a packing plant, where the grass is cut only for Decoration Day and wild rabbits bound among the stones, is the grave of John Zeide, a worker who died during the 1919 flu epidemic. On his monument are these words: *From the vast world above my grave / I hear the tread of marching men, / The patient armies of the Soviet*. Other such graves may be found in Greenwood Cemetery in Astoria, and some of these graves, including that of Maria Raunio, who fled to this country to escape being sent to Siberia following the general strike in Finland in 1905, have hammers and sickles engraved on their headstones. Maria, a textile worker from Tampara, head of a transport during the strike, was a member of the Finnish Diet at a time when women in Oregon could not even vote.

The foreign born workers were active in the struggles to improve conditions on the waterfront, in the fishing industry where they at first worked as boatpullers and net menders, in the mining and logging camps, shingle mills and textile mills of the Northwest. They "packed the rigging" in the harvest fields and on the ships, and later helped organize the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). They were also the backbone of resistance to World War 1.

The U.S. Immigration Service mounted a vast drive to deport these workers.

In the days when the street signs in Astoria reportedly were printed in both Finnish and English, the entire staff of a Finnish language daily newspaper was deported. The Javerts of the Immigration Service had not then devised, as they did later, the gimmick of canceling citizenship, so they were unable to exile one of the most articulate members of the Finnish community, Sulu Syvanen. A gifted linguist, he had managed to get his papers. One of the *Toveri* editors, Sanetri Nuorteva, had gone to Canada on a speaking tour and was deported from that country. He was at the bedside of John Reed when he died of typhus in Moscow.

*Dates in this article have been updated. Armistice Day 2003 is the 84th anniversary of the "Centralia Massacre".

**See *Bloody Thursday* and *The Streamlined Strike*, NCTE, July 1994.

***The reporter was Julia Ruuttila.

