

Fred Thompson, 1900-1987 Wobbly and Scholar

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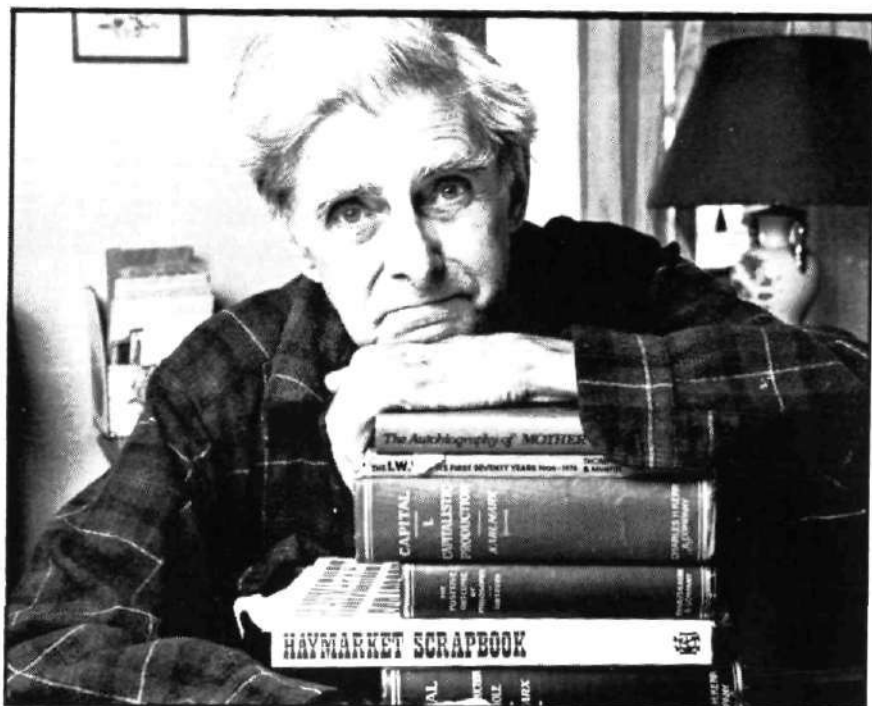
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OBITUARY/NÉCROLOGIE



Fred Thompson, 1900-1987 Wobbly and Scholar

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FRED THOMPSON, IWW ORGANIZER, editor, historian, and President of the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, died 9 March 1987, in Chicago, at the age of 86. Active in the Industrial Workers of the World for nearly 65 years, he was the most influential Wobbly since the 1930s. For countless younger radicals and labour activists today, Thompson provided a unique personal link to the IWW heritage.

Youngest in a family of five brothers and two sisters, Frederick Willard

Thompson was born 5 June 1900, in St. John, New Brunswick. A radical in his early teens, he started attending meetings of the Socialist Party of Canada, joined as soon as its bylaws permitted (probably at 16), and not long afterward became secretary of the St. John local. In 1920 he took part in the Halifax Shipyards strike — an important part, according to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who, in a 24 July 1920 report, noted that the strike “apparently in considerable part was the work of F.W. Thompson, a boy of not much more than 19 years of age. He was employed by the Halifax Shipyards Company on 11th May. He at once organized the labourers into an industrial union called the Marine Trades and Labour Federation; and he had the men out by 1st June.” When this RCMP evaluation of his role was first brought to his attention a few years ago by a Canadian student, Thompson pronounced it exaggerated and false. But there is no doubt that he was already at 19 a significant force in the labour movement. His friends included such prominent figures as Roscoe Fillmore (“the first socialist to impress me as knowing his subject thoroughly”), George Borland, and Donald Stewart, the last of whom regaled him with harrowing tales of Chartist battles with police decades earlier in Britain. When Thompson gave classes on Marx’s *Capital* to groups of workers in the hall above the offices of the *Halifax Citizen* (a labour paper which published his first news-story), most of his students were far older than their teenaged teacher; some had long before belonged to the Knights of Labor.

In summer 1920 Thompson headed west for the harvest and joined the Canadian One Big Union, a group he later described as having combined IWW structure with “the general ambience of the Labour Party in Britain in its somewhat radical 1919 period.” He participated in OBU activity in Saskatoon and Edmonton as well as in Calgary, where he was especially involved in organizing the unemployed. When OBU members were charged with conspiring to overthrow His Majesty’s government in the aftermath of the Winnipeg General Strike, Thompson’s name was included in the list of “co-conspirators” — evidently because, as secretary of the St. John SPC local, he had corresponded with some of those who were involved in the strike; but he was not indicted.

In winter 1920-21 he took part in SPC debates regarding affiliation with the Communist International. He opposed affiliation because he felt — as he wrote many years later — that the C.I.’s “Twenty-one Points” and Lenin’s views generally “bore so little correspondence to what I saw in western Canada.”

After a brief stay in Vancouver Thompson went south in March 1922, and worked on construction along the Pacific Coast. In San Francisco in September, he joined the Industrial Workers of the World, signed up by A. L. Nurse who is still active in the IWW today, in Montana. With red card number X22063 in his pocket, Fellow Worker Thompson devoted the rest

of his life to the Wobbly dream of working-class Education, Organization, and Emancipation.

It was not an easy life. In April 1923 he was arrested in Marysville, California, and charged with "criminal syndicalism" (IWW organizing). Convicted after two trials, he spent the next several years in the penitentiary at San Quentin. The young radical who had spoken at a Tom Mooney Defense meeting in 1919 now had the opportunity to speak with Tom Mooney himself in the prison yard.

When his term as a class-war prisoner ended in 1927, Thompson returned to the point of production, armed to the teeth with IWW leaflets and membership applications. He organized miners in Butte, Montana, and Denver, Colorado, in the late 1920s; auto workers in Detroit in the early 1930s (several of his fellow Wobs went on to enjoy long careers in the United Auto Workers); and metal workers in Cleveland later in the decade and all through the 1940s. Some of the plants he helped organize in Cleveland in the 1930s were still Wobbly shops as late as 1950, when they were lost to the union as a casualty of Taft-Hartley.

First elected to the IWW General Executive Board in 1928, representing Construction Workers' Industrial Union 310, Thompson served often on the GEB in later years, and in 1936-37 he was the union's General Secretary-Treasurer. From 1943 to 1946 he was secretary of the Metal and Machinery Workers' I.U. 440 branch in Cleveland where, in extremely adverse conditions, his abilities as Wobbly strategist and tactician were especially impressive. The IWW of course had refused to sign the wartime "no-strike pledge." Unlike most of the U.S. workforce in those years, Cleveland workers organized in the IWW during World War II won appreciable gains by means of brief walkouts, slowdowns, and innovative job-actions.

Many times editor of the weekly *Industrial Worker*, Thompson also wrote much of the union's organizing literature, from the famous "Bread Lines or Picket Lines?" leaflet of the early 1930s, which had a large impact on unemployed organizing in those Depression years, to more recent pamphlets such as *World Labor Needs a Union*.

For several months each year from 1928 to 1941 Thompson taught Marxist economics and labour history at the IWW Work People's College in Duluth, Minnesota. Interested in history even as a youngster, in the 1920s he was already "digging," that was his expression, IWW history, and before long he was recognized as the union's "official historian." His study, *The IWW: Its First Fifty Years*, was published by the union in 1955, and revised and updated in 1976. An excellent survey, this 200-page volume includes an abundance of invaluable information not to be found in much longer works, especially on the IWW after it reached its peak membership in 1923. Nonetheless, as its author readily acknowledged, the book is in many ways "too cramped" — a reflection of the IWW's limited financial resources.

Thompson's earlier histories, serialized in the IWW press (see the appended list of "Significant Publications"), include much fuller accounts of many events and issues that are treated too summarily in the book.

Thompson had no university degrees, but his experiences as a hobo, IWW organizer, and class-war prisoner helped give him a well-rounded education. He had a profound insight into working-class history and culture, a perception of the reality of working-class life, that too few historians have shared. His prodigious knowledge of IWW history and lore was drawn on by virtually every historian in the field. His running commentaries and reviews in the *Industrial Worker* and other publications remain a key source for "diggers" into any subject touching the IWW. A charter member of the Illinois Labor Society and an active participant in Workers' Education Local 189, he maintained an extensive correspondence with scores of labour historians all over the world. His papers are now part of the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University in Detroit.

Like so many radicals of his generation, Thompson learned much of history, economics, sociology, anthropology, and revolutionary theory by reading books and pamphlets published by the Charles H. Kerr Company of Chicago. In the early 1970s, when the venerable socialist publishing house had fallen on hard times, he was instrumental in bringing together a group of old-time labour radicals to reorganize it. Elected vice-president of the Kerr Board in 1971, he became president in July 1986. If the century-old Kerr Company has enjoyed an impressive resurgence in recent years, as a publisher of important works in the field of labour and radical history, a large share of the credit belongs to him.

Fred Thompson's IWW dream of a truly free, nonrepressive society — a society without classes, exploitation, poverty, or war — underlay everything he wrote. His ability to communicate that dream, in his historical no less than his polemical writings, was far from the least of his virtues. A free society is still very much worth dreaming about today, and Fred Thompson will remain an inspiration to all who are active in the struggle to realize that dream.

Significant Publication

"The IWW Tells Its Own Story," *Industrial Solidarity*, 21 December 1930 - 2 August 1932.

"The First Forty Years," *Industrial Worker*, 7 July - 25 August 1945.

"The Workers Who Built Cleveland," *Industrial Worker*, 7 September 1946; reprinted 1987 as a pamphlet co-published by Charles H. Kerr Company and the Greater Cleveland Labor History Society.

The IWW: Its First Fifty Years (Chicago 1955). A revised and updated edi-

tion, *The IWW: Its First Seventy Years* (Chicago 1976).

"They Didn't Suppress the Wobblies," *Radical America*, 1 (September - October 1967).

"Introduction" to Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, (Chicago 1975).

"A Rebel Voice: Fred Thompson Remember Halifax, 1919-1920." *This Magazine*, 12, 1(March 1978). Reprinted in *New Maritimes*, October 1982. This text, together with other (mostly unpublished) autobiographical writings, will be included in a book to be published by Charles H. Kerr in 1988.

Joe Hill: IWW Songwriter (Chicago 1979).

"Introduction" to *The Autobiography of Mother Jones* (Chicago 1980).

"Introduction: What Is This IWW?" and bibliographical afterword, "Digging IWW and Labor History," to Joyce Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Chicago 1987).

In addition to the forthcoming volume of autobiographical writings noted above, the Charles H. Kerr Company is also bringing out a collection of Thompson's scattered essays and reviews on IWW history.

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