

Interview with Sam and Esther Dolgoff

Ann Allen, Sam Dolgoff, Esther Dolgoff

1972

Ann Allen: Why don't you start and say a little about where you came from and first started working and how you got into the labor movement?

Sam Dolgoff: When I was about fourteen or fifteen, I lived in the Bronx in New York. And the Socialist Labor Party, the Socialist Party, used to have street meetings around the neighborhood. And I became very enthusiastic; they appealed to me very strongly. They popularized everything. They explained all about Karl Marx and the economic question, surplus value. I think that was the time when Morris Hillquit was running for mayor or he was running for the assembly. There were five socialists, socialist party members, who went to the assembly. And I remember; when they went to the assembly, they were packed off to Albany, the state assembly, and they called it the Red Special. They had a car, the last car, and the five elected candidates went on the car and they had a great big red banner in the back and they also had a big sign: "Socialist Party—County of New York—On The March To The Revolution." And a few months later they kicked them all out of the assembly. The Democrats had them kicked out of the assembly. And then Morris Hillquit ran for mayor and his slogan was - "Better Milk for Babies" and "More Milk for Babies." That was the time when the Russian Revolution was coming around. I can't give you exact dates; I'm very hazy about it. The Social Democrats split into two factions, one was the revolutionary faction and the other was the so called opportunistic or liberal faction. And I remember that somebody got on the box, an old socialist, I forget what his name was. He got up and he says, "The world is in flames; the revolutions have begun; and this son of a bitch is talking about milk for babies! And he can't even deliver! Because they threw his friends out of the assembly!" And then there was another fellow across the street, the SLP's, a neighborhood meeting you know. And the fellow from the SLP thought that the Social Democrat was a rank opportunist, and the fellow from the Social Democrats thought that the fellow from the SLP was crazy. I'm inclined to think they were both right. They had a shouting match, across the street. Each one shouted invectives at the other. And finally the fellow from the SLP brought out the heavy artillery: he leveled a charge against the candidate Hillquit, who was running for mayor. He said, "Is it true or is it not true," and he gave his original name, "that Moses Hillquit, alias Morris Hillquit, is a lawyer for the Burns Coal Company?" That was a big company in those days, used to supply coal and deliver ice to the iceboxes. They had no refrigerators. Well, anyhow, I became a YPSL, Young Peoples Socialist League. But, I kept on arguing about the point that the socialist were too opportunistic and all they thought about was little petty reforms and the revolution was right there and they

were not behaving right. I had a lot of objections. Well, that kept up for awhile and in the interim they had an election and they broke me in on the soapbox, They made me chairman. That's how I got initiated in soapboxerdom. And I was a watcher in Socialist Party elections. There was a fellow running for judge by the name of Samuel Orr and another one named Pankin. They had a sign that said, "He Who Wants A Social Revolution, Vote for Pankin and Samuel Orr." Both lawyers, by the way. And I got into another argument. Somebody had told me or I overheard a very nice phrase; and, like a monkey, I imitated it. I liked it that much, I didn't even credit the fellow who told me about it. I claimed it was my phrase. And I walked up to Samuel Orr, the candidate, and Jacob Pankin, who later became a judge under LaGuardia (a life job). They had a big meeting and in the middle of the meeting I got up and I said, "The Socialist Movement is a movement without a soul and without a spirit. It is a living corpse beginning to stench and smell of death, rotten to the core." I recited that little piece. And then for some reason or other they brought charges against me, They expelled me from the YPSLs. So, while I was being expelled from the YPSLs, another fellow who later became a candidate got up and said, "You know what the trouble with you is?" They had heard my defense and so forth. "You're not a socialist. You think you're a socialist? You're not a socialist; you belong with the crazies." He says, "There's a bunch of anarchists on Broadway, with a hall and a few IWWs around, not the good ones, you know, the nuts, You belong with them; you talk just like them." so I got up and I said, "Well," I said, "that's a sign that they must be very, very interesting and I'm sure that if they agree with me then they are very intelligent men. That's just what I'm looking for. Where are they?" "Well," he says, "I don't know where the hell they are. Somewheres on Broadway or 18th Street." So I came down, walked down there, and that's how I got in touch with the anarchists and with the Wobblies. The Wobblies were around that neighborhood.

Ann Allen: Were you working then?

Sam Dolgoff: Oh, yes, yes. I forgot all about that part. When I was about 12, or 11, my father was a painter, a housepainter. In Europe he was a commissary clerk on the Trans-Siberian RR. They had a bunch of railroad cars and where the track workers slept and another car where they supplied them with cigarettes, tobacco, underwear and different things. He had charge of their feeding, He also pinch hit as time keeper. So he came here and became a housepainter. For awhile I worked when I was 11 or 12 before going to school in the mornings and after school, Saturdays and Sundays. I used to work in a grocery, delivering milk to the customers. We used to have a dumb waiter. And I received three dollars a week. That's for working before breakfast, after coming back from school and Saturday and Sunday. Then, when they burned the school down to get me out of elementary school (I had a lot of trouble over there too), the old man said, "Well, maybe you want to go to high school." But at that time I left the grocery and got a job at Continental Can Company, that made tin cans. I worked about ten, twelve hours a day and was supposed to go to night high school. I lasted about three months and quit the night high school. I couldn't do it anymore. The old man says, "Well, you're hopeless." Besides, I had to work, he couldn't afford to pay to send me to college anyhow. So he says, "Well, I'll break you in to be a housepainter." So at the tender age of 15 I went to work with the old man to be a housepainter. And, I wouldn't listen to the old man and the old man, he says, "Ah, you're no good. I tell you something, you laugh; you run off. You'll never learn." He says, "I'm going to take you to a friend of mine." A fellow from Switzerland, a great big husky guy, a very very particular man, a painter, a contractor, a decorator contractor and very very fussy, a disciplinarian. He came from good stock; work for him was like being in the army, The old man came up to him and he says, "Take

my son and make a painter out of him. And don't treat him good, Cause if you ever treat him good or say one nice word, if you relax for a second in your discipline, he is going to climb all over you; he'll take advantage of you. Make him a painter. If he gives you an argument, kick him in the ass. And don't relax on him." So that's what this fellow did. So after about two years or so, or almost three years, one day he says to me, "That is enough! Go now and work: You will be alright, I think so," And I became a doctor of smearology. But then I became bored. With work. So I ran away from home and I started to bum around the states. And that's how I got in touch with the IWW.

Ann Allen: Did you soapbox for them when you traveled?

Sam Dolgoff: Oh yes. Well, while I was with the Social Democrats, I became a pretty fair soapboxer. And so they used my talents, And when I went through with the Wobblies, spoke on West Madison Street, in Chicago. And then I got kicked out of a lot of jobs, the different railroads, different places, you know. That's the way I got acquainted with the IWW.

Ann Allen: What kind of soapboxing did you do? How did it work?

Sam Dolgoff: Well, most of the time you'd get up there and explain to the workers that they had to organize into one big union, the IWW, and if they'd organize then they'd get better wages, shorter hours, and to hell with all the politicians, We used to tell them the stories, how we got them better conditions on the west coast. The boss wouldn't give them an 8 hour day, so at the end of 8 hours the lumberjacks blew a whistle and everybody went home. Then we gave them little examples of how strikes were won. You know. One example was: the Wobblies were trying to organize a restaurant. I don't know where. Someplace out in the sticks, Sheep Turd, Montana or some such place. The boss didn't give a damn, didn't want to do anything about it. They got a bunch of wobblies together, and they hired out; ostensibly they hired out as strikebreakers. But they were all Wobblies. They went into the restaurant and they prepared lunch. So one fellow fried hamburgers in the same dish they made fish in. And another fellow put mustard on top of the rice pudding. And the third one was waiting on table and he accidently spilled a bowl of hot soup on a customer's neck, And the place became terribly upset. A mouse tail was found. All kinds of things, awful damn things. Vinegar in the milk. And the boss went crazy you know. So he ran outside and he said, I'll settle up with anybody. Get rid of this mess." He didn't know who they were, you know. "I suspect," he says, "that this is a put up job, It must be a put up job."

Ann Allen: What was the beauty parlor incident you told me about before?

Sam Dolgoff: Oh, yeah. That was years later, That happened here in New York City, during the time of the Wagner Act. That was a time when people were getting hot about organization. So we had a contact and the contact said, "You know, my wife, she goes to the beauty parlor, In fact she says she knows somebody who works in the beauty parlor-and they're not happy about this job, Maybe we can organize the beauty parlor workers." So, they sent me down there, together with another fellow named Red Shannon. I think all the old Wobblies remember Red Shannon. We looked more like stevedores. We didn't look like anything. With our brown shirts, you know, that looked like a blanket, heavy shoes, and overalls, blue overalls, not like now you know. Red Shannon had a pair of brown overalls; looked like a plumber. Had whiskers you know, We looked very unkempt and everything else. We went up there and were introduced, There was a bunch of young girls, dolls, everyone of them, beautes, sitting there; and we came in there and we addressed them to organize the beauty parlor workers, The girls looked at us and they didn't like us. I could see they were thinking, who the hell are these people? Why don't you send a woman around or something, you know?- We talked to them and talked to them. And they says, 'Well,' they says,

"We might join you, but we're ashamed to picket." "What're you ashamed for?" "Oh, it doesn't look nice, in front of the beauty parlor, everybody knows me." "That's the reason we want you to picket. You've got customers; everybody knows you; they won't go in there." "I know but what am I going to live on in the meantime? You gonna pay my wages?" We saw right away that that ain't going to help, ain't going to help at all. We couldn't do anything+ They said they'd let us know and so forth and so on.

Ann Allen: What finally happened?

Sam Dolgoff: They joined the AFL, And the AFL told them, you don't have to picket. You don't have to get embarrassed or anything like that, And the AFL sent them a bunch of nice young fellows, all combed and perfumed, real nice looking, They looked like a bunch of fairies to me; we saw them later, And a couple of women around there. They said, you don't have to picket; you don't have to do anything; we'll pay you everything. And, they said, we're going to hire pickets for you. So whom do you think they hired? They went down to the Bowery and hired pickets, And they had the goddamned drunks stumbling up and down in front of the place. "We Beauty Parlor Workers Demand Union Recognition." You'd see an old drunk, a derelict, could hardly walk, was stumbling. And the "beauty parlor worker" would take a sip off the bottle every once in awhile, And they had half a dozen marching, And we come down there, I thought, how the hell are you ever going to win a strike like that?- But they won. They won anyhow. So there you are.

I have another incident. There was a Wobbly, Herbert Mailer. You ever heard of Herbert Mailer? Jesus Christ, He was the organizer of the General Defense Committee of the IWW. He did, I think, five years as a class war prisoner. Was a friend of Ralph Chaplin's, And Ben Fletcher. And he told me of one or two little incidents When I got this all; that was in the early 30's. That's damn near 40 years ago. When one wobbly would write to another, after the communication he would say, Yours for the OBU, Yours for the IWW, and so forth, So I got a hold of Mailer one day, and Mailer says, "That ain't no way to sign a letter." He says, "In my day when you wrote a letter, you says, Yours for the blood of the masters, signed so and so."

Then he told me another incident, He had a lot of these stories. Herb Nailer was a Canadian, He came from Canada and he was a very husky fellow, well built and a first rate boxer. In fact he was Victor McLaughlin's sparring partner, You know Victor McLaughlin, He played the movies, movie star. Well he came to the states, around Seattle, and a' lot of things happened. He became the secretary of the branch, And we had to have some cultural activities. So the cultural activities consisted, or one aspect was, that the IWW became amateur boxers, And they used to put up a show every once in awhile, They would train, and they'd get up on the stage, and they'd wear a pair of trunks, Iww. And they would go like this: if you don't wear the trunks and you get licked, it's OK. But, if you wear the trunks, IWW, and you get licked, we're going to kick the crap out of you.

Then, they had a course in training organizers. They used to train the organizers how to box. What the hell do you want to train a Wobbly delegate how to box? Well, they used to go out to the lumber camps to try to organize them. The fellow would go out there and he'd come up to the camp and the foreman or big shot there would come out and he'd say, "Well; you can organize us if you lick us." And the fellow there, he was a big husky fellow and he kicked the crap out of him. In two minutes he was flat, out: He came back, or rather he crawled back. "Hey," he says. "I went out on this trip and they said, if you want to organize me you gotta lick me. I couldn't lick them." "Well," Mailer says, "Don't worry about that. We'll fix all that up. 'We're going to take

care of that pretty good." So he says, "You're in training now." "What do you mean?" "You're in training" Got about half a dozen fellows and put them in training, teach them how to box you know. Boxing gloves and skipping rope. And doing all the things that have to be done. And he didn't pick big husky guys; he picked fellows that looked innocent. But A-Number 1 boxers. He said, "Now go out and organize the lumber workers. Constitute yourself a one man educational committee." They went out there and they says, "If you want to organize me you have to lick me." "OK, kid, here!" Bap!

Ann Allen: Do you remember the Palmer raids?

Sam Dolgoff: Oh sure I do, sure. Sure I remember the Palmer raids, sure. That was very very tough times. I remember here in New York, they used to have, if you wanted to have a hotdog, you said, gimme a hot dog with some sauerkraut, you know, kraut? They said anybody who orders sauerkraut is pro-German. So they enacted a law, they called sauerkraut liberty cabbage.

Ann Allen: Did you know Emma Goldman?

Sam Dolgoff: Yes, I met her once or twice.

Ann Allen: What was she like?

Sam Dolgoff: Well, I met her once in the house of her niece, Stella Ballantine, I think. And the Ballantines, that's the same family of the Ballantine Books, paperback books. In the Village. And I knew that she wasn't no big' husky but I took a look at her, she was a little half pint, How in the hell a little half pint like that could make so much noise! And raise such a dickens of hell, you know.

Ann Allen: She didn't have much to do' with the IWW, did she?

Sam Dolgoff: Well, I had the feeling that it was a rather ambiguous relationship. Neither she nor her sweetheart, the clap doctor from Chi we used to call him, Ben Reitman, they would help out or soap, you know; but I don't think they were really very enthusiastic about the IWW. Because they considered that the IWW was far too centralized, for one thing. Secondly, there were an awful lot of people in her circle who didn't believe in organization altogether. You said organization to them, that was like showing a red rag to a bull. They were inclined to be very individualistically minded, and besides that, (I know I wander here and there but that's alright), I always had the impression that she didn't represent the movement. See, with her, all her prestige and what have. you rested upon her personal contacts? And she was an enormously courageous and heroic figure in that sense. She was absolutely fearless for that matter. She happened to get in very solid, with all her revolutionary phraseology and the hyperbole. Basically, she was not really asking for much more than what today would be considered a liberal program. Birth control, equal rights for the women, a better education and so forth. There weren't many things that she asked for that the system couldn't withstand; in fact, they would help it.

Of course I'm not talking about socialism, but her appeal was not on that basis. Her appeal rested on these transient issues.

Ann Allen: Were you involved in the unemployed unions here in New York?

Sam Dolgoff: Yeah, I remember that; that was in the 30's. You had what you called the unemployed union. The unemployed union had a flat somewhere on the east side, a cold water flat and the toilet was in the hall and they had a coal stove. It was way up on the top floor, And the unemployed Wobblies would come around. If an unemployed fellow came around, the first day or two they fed him. On the second day or third day, in the morning, after breakfast, he was given a sack and told, you go out there and bring home some groceries. So they used to go down to the market; they very seldom bothered retailers. They went to the fish market; they went to

the wholesale grocery district; they went to the butcher district; they came home with all sorts of things.

Ann Allen: This is in New York or Chicago?

Sam Dolgoff: Mainly New York, They used to call everything a "union". The "unemployed union", it was the style. But, they had developed one tactic. It was a very important tactic. It was that they would picket the fellows that do work for shorter hours. They'd say, here we are, we're a bunch of people without a job, And you guys are working 8 hours, some of you guys are working 10 hours. You know better than to scab; you're letting me starve to-death while you go ahead and do this, that and the other thing. And they picketed, And they used to stress that point, the 4 hour day and the 4 day week more than anybody-else. But, they didn't listen to us. Because everybody was afraid; afraid of losing their jobs. They wouldn't stick their neck out. Then, they had the unemployed union in Chicago. And I remember passing through Chicago at the time.

The members of the so called unemployed union had to have educational work too. So they'd sit there and they'd read History of Syndicalism, by Levine, an old old book, the history of the IWW, labor papers and all sorts of things. The unemployed union would hold street meetings. There's a very humorous incident here. While I was there I was boarding in a house of a Jewish fellow,, I had a room there. I don't know what I paid him. I think he got three bucks a week or something like that. That was considered a lot of money you know. And he was a commie; I found out that he was a commie. I lived in his house for about three months. I knew him; I knew his kids, his wife. He introduced me to his grandmother; everybody I knew. A typical Jewish family. I don't know what he did for a living. I forgot what it was. I think, he used to work in a place where they knit sweaters. But he was a commie. I didn't pay any attention to that, didn't think anything of it. But then the unemployed union would hold meetings, street meetings. And we'd get up there; I think it was on North Avenue we had meetings, not too far from California, around there, Washtenaw. And we got up there to talk, you know, and all of a sudden the commies came to interrupt; And this guy, my landlord, he said, "I know this fascist. I know this guy. He is being paid by Hearst. How much money he makes from this, to fight the workers." And you know, he was brazen.

So I came back the same day; I had a room in his house. He was kind of shame faced, and he says, "You know how it is." I got rid of him.

Then, I remember, we had a meeting in Grand Circus Park, in Detroit. The anarchists and the Wobblies there used to talk. There was a mayor there named Murphy. He believed in free speech. But the radicals there didn't believe in free speech, So Murphy, the mayor, he says, "I'm impartial." He says, "Here you've got Grand Circus Park; everybody can talk, And if you're fighting around the way you're fighting around, I'm going to see to it that each one gets equal time. You can have that corner of this spot for half an hour and the commies can have that spot for an hour or whatever it is. You shouldn't fight about it." But the commies didn't like that; they didn't like that at all. And they used to come around all the time to disrupt them damn meetings. So finally they got an educational committee of the Wobblies to keep order. So they planted the Wobblies in the crowd, They had saps, heavy sticks, wrapped in the Daily Worker. And the fellow on the box, he'd get up and he'd say, "You ain't got the guts enough to acknowledge that you're commies. I dare you, if you're commies, raise your hand. Be a man." The minute they raised their hand, bang! They went to work on them. In two minutes they all collapsed. And when the police came around they found lead pipes wrapped up in Daily Workers. Then they never bothered with the Wobblies anymore.

Sam Dolgoff: Do you remember that incident on McDougal Street? [To Esther.] You tell it.

Esther Dolgoff: Well, the thing was this, the IWW used to conduct street corner meetings. This was before the war, the second world war. It was after the Spanish War, before the second world war. See the idea was that fascism was still rampant, that they had physically won out, and with so many people if you win the thing materially, then you've won it spiritually too. Anyway, the fascists were rearing their heads, and we had conducted a series of street corner meetings in which there was kind of battles. They'd come back and some of the boys actually got beat up. And the communists also did their part, of beating people up. Blackwell, who had been in Spain and who had not worked with the communists. He was in the Libertarian League; he was also a member of the Wobblies. When he went to Spain, he was with the POUM. He became more and more libertarian in his ideas, after he saw what happened in Spain. One time he was walking with his child in a baby carriage and they beat him up. The communists used to do that, They carried the strong arm squad to the United States and they beat him up, They beat him up badly. It didn't matter to them that he had a baby in the carriage. But that's besides the point. The IWW and other libertarians, anarchists, they would carry out street corner meetings, mostly the Wobblies at that time. To say about fascism, the rise of fascism, We had a meeting on McDougal Street telling about the IWW and at first there was [break in original]

And some of them heard Sam's name. I don't know if he told you about that. And they began with their fascistic, racist ideas, we call it racist now. They yelled "Sam, Sam," with a Jewish accent. "Go back where you came from, Sam, Sam." And they kept it up. And the people coming out of the saloons, the village has plenty of them, especially McDougal Street, they kept up this sing song. And one woman said, "Let's throw him off the box." A nice dressed woman; she was very stylish. And she says, "Let's dump the box." Well Sam stood there for all this while. And finally, silence had its effect, And finally they stopped. And Sam said, "I've been hearing that I should go back to where I came from. In the words of the famous Dr. Gish, it's a physiological and biological impossibility." And that broke the ice; everybody started laughing. And he gave his speech and the usual questions were asked. "You're just working against your country, patriotism, my son..."

Sam said he ought to be ashamed of himself, he has a son that means so little to him he's willing to send him off to imperialist wars. And that's that. I won't recapitulate the whole speech. But the idea was that there was a moral victory. For instance, we talked to people a great deal. As I said, they heckled,

We held the attention, but still there were stragglers that heckled. There was a man and he was putting out literature and so I said, "Why don't you listen?" He said, "Well, I believe in free speech." I said, "No, you don't," He said, "I'm a professor at New York University." I said, "Shame on you This is an open air class. Do you allow people in your class to heckle you? We have a question period, even a discussion period. You can get up and say your piece. And if you don't like that, you go across the corner; you get yourself a box; and you get up and try to hold a crowd. This is an open air class. And you don't know anything about free speech and you claim that you teach in New York University." So, he became apologetic and he took some of the literature to save his face. And made a joke of it. The cops kept pushing the drunks into the meeting. And there was one fellow by the name of Freddy Miller. He's dead and gone but he was a saint, a walking saint. And he says to the cops, "What are you doing, pushing these drunks in here?" He says, "This is a class, this is a meeting of the IWW. Your job is to take the drunks out of the meeting." And anyway, we won morally. We held our ground. Before Sam got off, he says, "Now I want it to be as quiet for the next speaker, Fellow Worker, as it was for me. You've behaved

yourselves, finally, beyond reproach. Now listen to the next fellow worker the way you have to me." And we had a moral victory, What happened? "Oh, my uncle was an IWW. He was an old timer. I remember him." "My father was a member of the IWW." Everybody became members-of the IWW. But it was a very exciting meeting. And I think that those that were present were bound to have learned something. A thing like that has an effect on people. Because Wobblies, the ones that I remember, all had a sense of humor. They were able to speak in their own language; they had in fact developed a kind of language. It was humorous. It also came from their practical life so it had vitality. It wasn't just phrases. So, it went over with a bang. We had a moral victory. They asked questions and they got up on the box. After that they wanted to buy the speakers drinks. In fact the worst heckler took Sam in for a couple of beers. This is a true story.

There were other things that were outstanding. For instance, in that book that was put out, supposed to be sympathetic to the Wobblies, used to sell for twelve dollars. I forgot her name, Cornfeld or something. She was supposed to have some sociological essays or excerpts, and there they talk about the Wobblies being misfits, and they talk about them being the bummary. In fact, the respectable working class used to call them the bummary.

Sam Dolgoff: The SLP called us the bummary. The Detroit Wobblies used to call the Chicago Wobblies the bummary, And the Detroit Wobblies were run by the SLP, headed by Daniel DeLeon.

Esther Dolgoff: Now in answer to this sociological study, and this was supposed to be sympathetic and she has quite a nice few poems that were written by Wobblies and songs, but in answer to her sociology, we're happy, we're proud of the fact. Like Hannah Arendt talks about these perfectly normal people who fitted so well into Hitler's regime. I happened to write a review of her book, and I said, we're very proud of these ill fitting people with all their quirks, who stand up on their two feet and see the injustice. And try to do some- thing about it. That's not sick; it's healthy. And so, they called us the bummary.

There was an esprit de corps with the Wobblies, I don't know if it's still with the young people. You could come into any Wobblies house and if they knew you were a Wobbly the door was open, They would share pot luck, whatever they had, their food, their clothes, everything. And you'd be surprised, there are incidents always in any organization, especially a mass organization, but what solidarity there really was. I know that the sailors, they came off the ships, they always asked, they didn't even have to ask, they would hand, they called it piece off, they would hand some of their wages, some of their money to fellow workers that had come to the hall and piece each one off. In case they weren't working and they needed it. It wasn't a question of charity or asking you if you needed it; it just was done. Of course, with that, a lot of it was wasted because, well I'm a teetotaler, but that's part of it I guess. There'd be quite a bit of drinking. But, as I told the woman who was here yesterday, every Wobbly Hall had a very good library.

And every Wobbly branch or hall tried to have forums. That was not the business meetings but forums to which the outside would be invited and try to have speakers. And then they would have Class War Prisoners Balls, around Christmas time, to gather funds for any class war prisoner, didn't matter whether he was a member of the IWW or not. Then of course they had monthly dinners to help pay for the expenses of the Hall. The young Wobblies used to have their own meetings. They were taught how to run a meeting, I remember when our young people, when my son was a youngster, a teenager, that there was a young fellow, the secretary of the hall, and he took these young kids and he said, "Now you're chairman. You run the meeting." And they talked about rules of order. And my son, coming from our household, I don't know if he got it from us, but he had that feeling, what do you need all these rules of order? But, they said, "This is

the way the Wobblies run the meetings.” And each one was given a chance to learn how to run the meeting and also how to take care of the books. So it was no mystery. Each committee, appointed at the meeting, would go to look at the books, audit the books,” Which is quite a democratic procedure. They had a very simple system of auditing the books. Now the boys were taught that. One time we went to a meeting, which was not a Wobbly meeting and they said, ”What do we need a chairman for?” And the first fellow who got there and had the loudest voice, he did all the speaking. And I said, my son was present, and I said, ”you see why we have the rules of order? So that everybody had a chance, not the one who’s loudest or has the most dominant personality. So this is very important. The reason that I bring this up is not just that I’m wandering. It’s that I’ve been present at quite a few meetings of the so called young left, and they don’t know how to conduct a meeting. It was amazing to me. It was absolutely amazing. A big meeting, it wasn’t a mass meeting, it was a convention or a conference where people came from different parts of the country. They probably came there with something to say or they wouldn’t have made the trip. They would get up to speak, and then someone would come and cut in on them, and it was a mish mosh. By the time you were through, no one heard anyone. Now that is a disgrace. Because the humble Wobblies, these bums, they at least knew how to conduct their meetings. And I think that’s very important, It’s the basis of democracy. You have in the other unions where they don’t give you a chance, it’s all taken care of before hand and they go through a kind of symbolic or hypocritical procedure.

Ann Allen: The Wobblies were one of the few unions with blacks in it.

Esther Dolgoff: Oh yes. Down south they had some of the first meetings for blacks and whites; they had to have them in the open air.

Sam Dolgoff: Did I ever tell you about Ben Fletcher in Norfolk, Virginia? Ben Fletcher was addressing a meeting in Norfolk, Virginia, and you know Ben Fletcher was very, very black. And he was talking about racial equality and so forth and so on. Some of the racists in the crowd, the white racists, wanted to embarrass him or get him to say something that would provoke a riot So they asked him a question. They said, ”Ben, what do you think of a black man living with a white woman? Ben looked around, he looked all around. He said, ”I don’t see many people here that’s any blacker than me.”

Esther Dolgoff: When Ben Fletcher was in jail the trustee was a colored fellow but he made life miserable for him. Because everyone was against the IWW; called it the I ”trouble-u trouble-u,” and ”I won’t work.” They were supposed to be criminal syndicalists. There was a great persecution of the IWW, And the jail, which is a reflection of the society outside, there’s quite a few articles on that subject in the English Anarchy magazine, but that’s another thing. But he was miserable to him. But when Ben Fletcher got out, he was walking along the street and this trustee had gotten out by that time and he met him. And the trustee, he said, black as he was, he turned white when he saw Ben. But Ben, he went up to him and said, ”How do you do? How do you feel?” And he was able to talk to him and start some ideas in his head, But that’s the kind of man that he was. He was quite brilliant and he was a printer, in Philadelphia, Then he worked for the longshoremen. He organized thousands on the docks in Philadelphia. But what gets me is the things that they called for, it seems cruel that they would have to fight that hard. For instance, to have grappling irons, not to grab the freight when it came in by the hands. You wouldn’t think that they’d have to fight so hard for it. Now of course it’s all mechanized but not at that time. When he was so crippled the FBI still followed him around, fearing his powers to organize. He had beautiful English, beautiful diction. He was a printer and he started early to be interested in

social questions. And so he fought for the IWW. And I've often wondered, here is a bona fide, true blue hero. They have such characters that they choose as their symbols, the colored people. And no one hears of him. You know, when he was jailed against the first world war and they gave him ten years, they gave long sentences then.- His turn came up and the judge said, "Have you anything to say?" He says, "Your grammar's very poor judge, and your sentences are too long." He was a well read man, He had a dignity, and he worked hard for his living. He was no pie card artist, As I told you, he was so crippled, he had to push the dolly. We had so many of these people, so devoted. And that's what an organization needs, very devoted and idealistic people.

Ann Allen: What about the women?

Esther Dolgoff: Well many of them even when they were old, when the Wobblies were not a force, wherever they worked, for instance, this woman that I'm speaking of, she came to a shop to work and the toilet was stuffed, it ran into the shop itself, It was supposed to be a very fine shop, but this is how the workers were. Many of the things Wobblies took for granted that they should be rectified, in fact, any union. But there was a laxity. The worker was so afraid, especially the older worker, of being fired, and when he's fired he loses his medicare, a whole series of things. What we used to call quenching the fires of revolution with a bowl of soup. So this woman, being an old lady, and the others were quite a few older ones there, got together. She convinced them that it was within their rights and they had every right to see that sanitary conditions were there. Mostly they were Italian women that were there. In the end they won out. They got everything and they made a party for that same woman and they gave her a gift. But see, a Wobbly always had more influence than their physical numbers were. Their greatest trick was in being the conscience of the labor movement. And every labor movement, I don't care, every organization, needs a conscience. Every social movement needs a conscience. They were very active. And their greatest work was when they pushed the AFL and the other unions more to the left. And some of the things, like not crossing the picket line, the Wobblies were not the only ones who said that, but this is what they put their emphasis on. On solidarity, on not crossing the picket line, on never sabotaging another working class organization. As I said, it's very important to have a conscience.

Ann Allen: What about Matilda Robbins?

Esther Dolgoff: I didn't know her but I read her things. She was on the lecture tour. I may have seen her at meetings, but I don't remember. But she was a very beautiful writer. You can look up her articles and her poems. We had any number of good women writers. Then we had, as I said, a college here in New York city.

Ann Allen: What kind of a college?

Esther Dolgoff: It was on 94 (?) Fifth Avenue was the address. One old fellow worker came forward, he taught speech at, I think it was New York University. Another man worked on the New York Times and he was a reporter. He knew about journalism. There were any number of people who came forward; from their professions, to teach. Now the people came from work, they didn't have an opportunity to go out or home, so the women made food which was sold at very small prices. So that people could get a sandwich and coffee and salad, you know. And the women also practiced what they learned in the classes. One place that I was interested in, or took part in, was the class in speech. And all term we had to get in front of the class. First we stood up by our seat, and said who we-were and etc. Then we had to put on a formal speech. Then the graduating class, we had a soap box out on the corner with a big sign- Graduating Class IWW Speech Class. We had to get up on the box and make a speech; Let me tell you, it was very

different than getting up in class or speaking in front of a little group. You'd be shaking. And it's very hard to maintain an audience. But the public was very, very interested. And proud, they thought we did something wonderful. It was the depths of the depression,

Ann Allen: What other kind of classes did they have besides speech?

Esther Dolgoff: Journalism. They would do simple pieces up for the IW. And they had art classes and you'd be surprised what beautiful, beautiful things they did,

You could throw me over with a feather, the ones that did the most beautiful work. The ones you least suspected. Not only that, but a place where people come together for something creative is always stimulating. It always gives a good feeling and it always leads to better things.

Ann Allen: What about child care?

Esther Dolgoff: Well, I suppose in the other days when people went to work. I wouldn't know too much about that, We helped each other out. Sometimes when I think back, I was a Catholic Worker all by myself. It wasn't charity, I can't even call it social services, it was friendship really. I'd have people walking in with a child. They had to go to the doctor and they didn't know where to leave the other baby. They had to buy a pair of shoes or they just wanted to visit. It got to be very difficult, because, as I said, in every mass organization, not everybody is of the same background. And some people looked at it, either you're a fool because they know they have to pay babysitters, or that you're stupid. Or they, I don't know how to explain it. But after a while I told one person, "Has it ever occurred to you that we have a group of people who look at things differently? So what may be to you stupidity, to us is very important?" Such a thing as friendship, hospitality concern over a young kid who was stranded,- he has a check to pay for his room but they won't accept the check.

Ann Allen: Did the women in the Wobblies do a lot of direct organizing?

Esther Dolgoff: Why yes I told you. Sure they did. Women organized wherever they were. That's the strength of a Wobbly. Wherever they were they were able to give an incentive or an outlook to the worker. This is a case that I know. They went because everybody was working and I had time; my kids were in school at that time; so I had free time. And they all thought it was a wonderful idea, that we should do something for the workers of Spain; and nothing happened. They kept putting us off. I kept going there, and I got so sick and tired of it. But Norman Thomas was not in town, so whole organizations were paralyzed. Nobody did anything because the leader wasn't there. I said, but you agreed to it. It's important. Time is being wasted; This was really to save lives. There were 11 comrades, fellow workers, that were up for execution. And all over the world were protests. There were posters in France as big as this wall. They said, "Down With The Assassins." Big yellow posters with great big black letters. And the leading people all over the world were protesting this massacre. Because these people had not only fought against Franco; they fought in the resistance in France.- Some of them were internationally known people. And they came back to Spain and at this late date they were carrying out their vendetta. So we had this thing before us. We said, time is of the essence, why can't you start doing things? So they waited and finally Norman Thomas came. And I went there with Blackwell. As I said, I had time, I don't want to give myself undue credit, you know, the women. And we had to educate Thomas actually, because he had been away. He responded beautifully to it. We had meetings of several organizations. And we knew that we'd have to be the Jimmy Higgins, because it was our thing. We gave the money to print the leaflets. To start the thing going. And we took the background, because we were interested in saving lives. And we had some wonderful response from people that had gone far away from this scene. They had climbed up the ladder so beautifully. Later on

of course it gets to be a routine thing and only the very interested people come. I remember that people we didn't meet for years had showed up. Through our protests, five people were saved and six were executed. We felt that we were part of that big movement to protest such a massacre. The Wobblies did take part in that; they initiated it, you see. And the women did take part, And we were able to see the difference, with all the faults; of a libertarian organization; at least there was no hierarchy. We sometimes think it's too loose; that's what we were complaining about. But everybody is motivated. We made calls to different organizations. Sam and the Blackwells sat up one night to compose a telegram which would be acceptable to Green, at that time they had a convention, to present the protest of one labor movement to another. They did take it up, in fact they said it could have been a bit stronger. But that's how history is written. A fellow like Green could get up and speak his piece but it was written by the Wobblies. But they did make a protest; it's better than letting it go as if nobody cared. And five people were saved. And the criticism: They said to us, "Ha, you're going with Norman Thomas." The purists, you know, they were doing nothing most of the time. And I told them, when a person is dead, that's the end, And these are comrades. If we had to get down on our knees and actually kiss the behind of the pope, if we felt he could save all of them, we'd do it. Because when you're dead, that's the end. And so, quite a few interesting things that I've seen. And the years went by. And when I stop to think, what did I do? It's just on a larger scale, everything. Instead of better, it's gotten worse. Because the way things in Spain failed, that to me was the turning point.

INDEX

AFL 7 22
 Arendt, Hannah 17
 Ballantine, Stella 10
 Burns Coal Co. 2
 Chaplin, Ralph. 8
 De Leon, Daniel 17
 Democratic Party 1
 Fletcher, Ben 8,20, 21
 Franco 25, 26
 Goldman, Emma 10, 11
 Hillquist, Morris 1,2
 LaGuardia 3
 Libertarian League 14
 Mailer, Herbert 8, 9,25
 Marx, Karl
 McLaughlin, Victor 9
 Miller, Freddy 16
 New York University 2, 3
 Orr, Samuel 2, 3
 Pankin, Jacob 2, 3
 Palmer Raids 10
 Reitman, Ben 11
 Robbins, Matilda 22
 Shannon, Red 6, 7
 Socialist Labor Party 25, 1, 2, 17 1, 2, 3 26, 27 12, 13

Socialist Party 25

Thomas, Norman 25

Unemployed Unions

United Libertarian Organization

Workers Defense League

Young People's Socialist League 2, 3

https://libcom.org/history/1972-oral-history-sam-dolgoff?mc_cid=0d92360c03&mc_eid=da432cc51b

Interview with Sam and Esther Dolgoff

by Ann Allen

June 15, 1972 Time - 1 hour

Respondents: Sam and Esther Dolgoff (Pen name Sam Weiner) Interviewer: Ann Allen

June 15, 1972

Ann Allen: Why don't you start and say a little about where you came from and first started working and how you got into the labor movement?

Sam Dolgoff: When I was about fourteen or fifteen, I lived in the Bronx in New York. And the Socialist Labor Party, the Socialist Party, used to have street meetings around the neighborhood. And I became very enthusiastic; they appealed to me very strongly. They popularized everything. They explained all about Karl Marx and the economic question, surplus value. I think that was the time when Morris Hillquit was running for mayor or he was running for the assembly. There were five socialists, socialist party members, who went to the assembly. And I remember; when they went to the assembly, they were packed off to Albany, the state assembly, and they called it the Red Special. They had a car, the last car, and the five elected candidates went on the car and they had a great big red banner in the back and they also had a big sign: "Socialist Party-County of New York-On The March To The Revolution." And a few months later they kicked them all out of the assembly. The Democrats had them kicked out of the assembly. And then Morris Hillquit ran for mayor and his slogan was - "Better Milk for Babies" and "More Milk for Babies." That was the time when the Russian Revolution was coming around. I can't give you exact dates; I'm very hazy about it. The Social Democrats split into two factions, one was the revolutionary faction and the other was the so called opportunistic or liberal faction. And I remember that somebody got on the box, an old socialist, I forget what his name was. He got up and he says, "The world is in flames; the revolutions have begun; and this son of a bitch is talking about milk for babies! And he can't even deliver! Because they threw his friends out of the assembly!" And then there was another fellow across the street, the SLP's, a neighborhood meeting you know. And the fellow from the SLP thought that the Social Democrat was a rank opportunist, and the fellow from the Social Democrats thought that the fellow from the SLP was crazy. I'm inclined to think they were both right. They had a shouting match, across the street. Each one shouted invectives at the other. And finally the fellow from the SLP brought out the heavy artillery: he leveled a charge against the candidate Hillquit, who was running for mayor. He said, "Is it true or is it not true," and he gave his original name, "that Moses Hillquit, alias Morris Hillquit, is a lawyer for the Burns Coal Company?" That was a big company in those days, used to supply coal and deliver ice to the iceboxes. They had no refrigerators. Well, anyhow, I became a YPSL, Young Peoples Socialist League. But, I kept on arguing about the point that the socialist were too opportunistic and all they thought about was little petty reforms and the revolution was right there and they were not behaving right. I had a lot of objections. Well, that kept up for awhile and in the interim they had an election and they broke me in on the soapbox, They made me chairman. That's how

I got initiated in soapboxerdom. And I was a watcher in Socialist Party elections. There was a fellow running for judge by the name of Samuel Orr and another one named Pankin. They had a sign that said, "He Who Wants A Social Revolution, Vote for Pankin and Samuel Orr." Both lawyers, by the way. And I got into another argument. Somebody had told me or I overheard a very nice phrase; and, like a monkey, I imitated it. I liked it that much, I didn't even credit the fellow who told me about it. I claimed it was my phrase. And I walked up to Samuel Orr, the candidate, and Jacob Pankin, who later became a judge under LaGuardia (a life job). They had a big meeting and in the middle of the meeting I got up and I said, "The Socialist Movement is a movement without a soul and without a spirit. It is a living corpse beginning to stench and smell of death, rotten to the core." I recited that little piece. And then for some reason or other they brought charges against me, They expelled me from the YPSLs. So, while I was being expelled from the YPSLs, another fellow who later became a candidate got up and said, "You know what the trouble with you is?" They had heard my defense and so forth. "You're not a socialist. You think you're a socialist? You're not a socialist; you belong with the crazies." He says, "There's a bunch of anarchists on Broadway, with a hall and a few IWWs around, not the good ones, you know, the nuts, You belong with them; you talk just like them." so I got up and I said, "Well," I said, "that's a sign that they must be very, very interesting and I'm sure that if they agree with me then they are very intelligent men. That's just what I'm looking for. Where are they?" "Well," he says, "I don't know where the hell they are. Somewheres on Broadway or 18th Street." So I came down, walked down there, and that's how I got in touch with the anarchists and with the Wobblies. The Wobblies were around that neighborhood.

Ann Allen: Were you working then?

Sam Dolgoff: Oh, yes, yes. I forgot all about that part. When I was about 12, or 11, my father was a painter, a housepainter. In Europe he was a commissary clerk on the Trans-Siberian RR. They had a bunch of railroad cars and where the track workers slept and another car where they supplied them with cigarettes, tobacco, underwear and different things. He had charge of their feeding, He also pinch hit as time keeper. So he came here and became a housepainter. For awhile I worked when I was 11 or 12 before going to school in the mornings and after school, Saturdays and Sundays. I used to work in a grocery, delivering milk to the customers. We used to have a dumb waiter. And I received three dollars a week. That's for working before breakfast, after coming back from school and Saturday and Sunday. Then, when they burned the school down to get me out of elementary school (I had a lot of trouble over there too), the old man said, "Well, maybe you want to go to high school." But at that time I left the grocery and got a job at Continental Can Company, that made tin cans. I worked about ten, twelve hours a day and was supposed to go to night high school. I lasted about three months and quit the night high school. I couldn't do it anymore. The old man says, "Well, you're hopeless." Besides, I had to work, he couldn't afford to pay to send me to college anyhow. So he says, "Well, I'll break you in to be a housepainter." So at the tender age of 15 I went to work with the old man to be a housepainter. And, I wouldn't listen to the old man and the old man, he says, "Ah, you're no good. I tell you something, you laugh; you run off. You'll never learn." He says, "I'm going to take you to a friend of mine." A fellow from Switzerland, a great big husky guy, a very very particular man, a painter, a contractor, a decorator contractor and very very fussy, a disciplinarian. He came from good stock; work for him was like being in the army, The old man came up to him and he says, "Take my son and make a painter out of him. And don't treat him good, Cause if you ever treat him good or say one nice word, if you relax for a second in your discipline, he is going to climb all

over you; he'll take advantage of you. Make him a painter. If he gives you an argument, kick him in the ass. And don't relax on him." So that's what this fellow did. So after about two years or so, or almost three years, one day he says to me, "That is enough! Go now and work: You will be alright, I think so," And I became a doctor of smearology. But then I became bored. With work. So I ran away from home and I started to bum around the states. And that's how I got in touch with the IWW.

Ann Allen: Did you soapbox for them when you traveled?

Sam Dolgoff: Oh yes. Well, while I was with the Social Democrats, I became a pretty fair soapboxer. And so they used my talents, And when I went through with the Wobblies, spoke on West Madison Street, in Chicago. And then I got kicked out of a lot of jobs, the different railroads, different places, you know. That's the way I got acquainted with the IWW.

Ann Allen: What kind of soapboxing did you do? How did it work?

Sam Dolgoff: Well, most of the time you'd get up there and explain to the workers that they had to organize into one big union, the IWW, and if they'd organize then they'd get better wages, shorter hours, and to hell with all the politicians, We used to tell them the stories, how we got them better conditions on the west coast. The boss wouldn't give them an 8 hour day, so at the end of 8 hours the lumberjacks blew a whistle and everybody went home. Then we gave them little examples of how strikes were won. You know. One example was: the Wobblies were trying to organize a restaurant. I don't know where. Someplace out in the sticks, Sheep Turd, Montana or some such place. The boss didn't give a damn, didn't want to do anything about it. They got a bunch of wobblies together, and they hired out; ostensibly they hired out as strikebreakers. But they were all Wobblies. They went into the restaurant and they prepared lunch. So one fellow fried hamburgers in the same dish they made fish in. And another fellow put mustard on top of the rice pudding. And the third one was waiting on table and he accidentally spilled a bowl of hot soup on a customer's neck, And the place became terribly upset. A mouse tail was found. All kinds of things, awful damn things. Vinegar in the milk. And the boss went crazy you know. So he ran outside and he said, I'll settle up with anybody. Get rid of this mess." He didn't know who they were, you know. "I suspect," he says, "that this is a put up job, It must be a put up job."

Ann Allen: What was the beauty parlor incident you told me about before?

Sam Dolgoff: Oh, yeah. That was years later, That happened here in New York City, during the time of the Wagner Act. That was a time when people were getting hot about organization. So we had a contact and the contact said, "You know, my wife, she goes to the beauty parlor, In fact she says she knows somebody who works in the beauty parlor-and they're not happy about this job, Maybe we can organize the beauty parlor workers." So, they sent me down there, together with another fellow named Red Shannon. I think all the old Wobblies remember Red Shannon. We looked more like stevedores. We didn't look like anything. With our brown shirts, you know, that looked like a blanket, heavy shoes, and overalls, blue overalls, not like now you know. Red Shannon had a pair of brown overalls; looked like a plumber. Had whiskers you know, We looked very unkempt and everything else. We went up there and were introduced, There was a bunch of young girls, dolls, everyone of them, beauts, sitting there; and we came in there and we addressed them to organize the beauty parlor workers, The girls looked at us and they didn't like us. I could see they were thinking, who the hell are these people? Why don't you send a woman around or something, you know?- We talked to them and talked to them. And they says, 'Well,' they says, "We might join you, but we're ashamed to picket." "What're you ashamed for?" "Oh, it doesn't look nice, in front of the beauty parlor, everybody knows me." "That's the reason we want you to

picket. You've got customers; everybody knows you; they won't go in there." "I know but what am I going to live on in the meantime? You gonna pay my wages?" We saw right away that that ain't going to help, ain't going to help at all. We couldn't do anything+ They said they'd let us know and so forth and so on.

Ann Allen: What finally happened?

Sam Dolgoff: They joined the AFL, And the AFL told them, you don't have to picket. You don't have to get embarrassed or anything like that, And the AFL sent them a bunch of nice young fellows, all combed and perfumed, real nice looking, They looked like a bunch of fairies to me; we saw them later, And a couple of women around there. They said, you don't have to picket; you don't have to do anything; we'll pay you everything. And, they said, we're going to hire pickets for you. So whom do you think they hired? They went down to the Bowery and hired pickets, And they had the goddamned drunks stumbling up and down in front of the place. "We Beauty Parlor Workers Demand Union Recognition." You'd see an old drunk, a derelict, could hardly walk, was stumbling. And the "beauty parlor worker" would take a sip off the bottle every once in awhile, And they had half a dozen marching, And we come down there, I thought, how the hell are you ever going to win a strike like that?- But they won. They won anyhow. So there you are.

I have another incident. There was a Wobbly, Herbert Mailer. You ever heard of Herbert Mailer? Jesus Christ, He was the organizer of the General Defense Committee of the IWW. He did, I think, five years as a class war prisoner. Was a friend of Ralph Chaplin's, And Ben Fletcher. And he told me of one or two little incidents When I got this all; that was in the early 30's. That's damn near 40 years ago. When one wobbly would write to another, after the communication he would say, Yours for the OBU, Yours for the IWW, and so forth, So I got a hold of Mailer one day, and Mailer says, "That ain't no way to sign a letter:" He says, "In my day when you wrote a letter, you says, Yours for the blood of the masters, signed so and so."

Then he told me another incident, He had a lot of these stories. Herb Nailer was a Canadian, He came from Canada and he was a very husky fellow, well built and a first rate boxer. In fact he was Victor McLaughlin's sparring partner, You know Victor McLaughlin, He played the movies, movie star. Well he came to the states, around Seattle, and a' lot of things happened. He became the secretary of the branch, And we had to have some cultural activities. So the cultural activities consisted, or one aspect was, that the IWW became amateur boxers, And they used to put up a show every once in awhile, They would train, and they'd get up on the stage, and they'd wear a pair of trunks, Iww. And they would go like this: if you don't wear the trunks and you get licked, it's OK. But, if you wear the trunks, IWW, and you get licked, we're going to kick the crap out of you.

Then, they had a course in training organizers. They used to train the organizers how to box. What the hell do you want to train a Wobbly delegate how to box? Well, they used to go out to the lumber camps to try to organize them. The fellow would go out there and he'd come up to the camp and the foreman or big shot there would come out and he'd say, "Well; you can organize us if you lick us." And the fellow there, he was a big husky fellow and he kicked the crap out of him. In two minutes he was flat, out: He came back, or rather he crawled back. "Hey," he says. "I went out on this trip and they said, if you want to organize me you gotta lick me. I couldn't lick them." "Well," Mailer says, "Don't worry about that. We'll fix all that up. 'We're going to take care of that pretty good.'" So he says, "You're in training now." "What do you mean?" "You're in training" Got about half a dozen fellows and put them in training, teach them how to box you

know. Boxing gloves and skipping rope. And doing all the things that have to be done. And he didn't pick big husky guys; he picked fellows that looked innocent. But A-Number 1 boxers. He said, "Now go out and organize the lumber workers. Constitute yourself a one man educational committee." They went out there and they says, "If you want to organize me you have to lick me." "OK, kid, here!" Bap!

Ann Allen: Do you remember the Palmer raids?

Sam Dolgoff: Oh sure I do, sure. Sure I remember the Palmer raids, sure. That was very very tough times. I remember here in New York, they used to have, if you wanted to have a hotdog, you said, gimme a hot dog with some sauerkraut, you know, kraut? They said anybody who orders sauerkraut is pro-German. So they enacted a law, they called sauerkraut liberty cabbage.

Ann Allen: Did you know Emma Goldman?

Sam Dolgoff: Yes, I met her once or twice.

Ann Allen: What was she like?

Sam Dolgoff: Well, I met her once in the house of her niece, Stella Ballantine, I think. And the Ballantines, that's the same family of the Ballantine Books, paperback books. In the Village. And I knew that she wasn't no big' husky but I took a look at her, she was a little half pint, How in the hell a little half pint like that could make so much noise! And raise such a dickens of hell, you know.

Ann Allen: She didn't have much to do' with the IWW, did she?

Sam Dolgoff: Well, I had the feeling that it was a rather ambiguous relationship. Neither she nor her sweetheart, the clap doctor from Chi we used to call him, Ben Reitman, they would help out or soap, you know; but I don't think they were really very enthusiastic about the IWW. Because they considered that the IWW was far too centralized, for one thing. Secondly, there were an awful lot of people in her circle who didn't believe in organization altogether. You said organization to them, that was like showing a red rag to a bull. They were inclined to be very individualistically minded, and besides that, (I know I wander here and there but that's alright), I always had the impression that she didn't represent the movement. See, with her, all her prestige and what have. you rested upon her personal contacts? And she was an enormously courageous and heroic figure in that sense. She was absolutely fearless for that matter. She happened to get in very solid, with all her revolutionary phraseology and the hyperbole. Basically, she was not really asking for much more than what today would be considered a liberal program. Birth control, equal rights for the women, a better education and so forth. There weren't many things that she asked for that the system couldn't withstand; in fact, they would help it.

Of course I'm not talking about socialism, but her appeal was not on that basis. Her appeal rested on these transient issues.

Ann Allen: Were you involved in the unemployed unions here in New York?

Sam Dolgoff: Yeah, I remember that; that was in the 30's. You had what you called the unemployed union. The unemployed union had a flat somewhere on the east side, a cold water flat and the toilet was in the hall and they had a coal stove. It was way up on the top floor, And the unemployed Wobblies would come around. If an unemployed fellow came around, the first day or two they fed him. On the second day or third day, in the morning, after breakfast, he was given a sack and told, you go out there and bring home some groceries. So they used to go down to the market; they very seldom bothered retailers. They went to the fish market; they went to the wholesale grocery district; they went to the butcher district; they came home with all sorts of things.

Ann Allen: This is in New York or Chicago?

Sam Dolgoff: Mainly New York, They used to call everything a "union". The "unemployed union", it was the style. But, they had developed one tactic. It was a very important tactic. It was that they would picket the fellows that do work for shorter hours. They'd say, here we are, we're a bunch of people without a job, And you guys are working 8 hours, some of you guys are working 10 hours. You know better than to scab; you're letting me starve to-death while you go ahead and do this, that and the other thing. And they picketed, And they used to stress that point, the 4 hour day and the 4 day week more than anybody-else. But, they didn't listen to us. Because everybody was afraid; afraid of losing their jobs. They wouldn't stick their neck out. Then, they had the unemployed union in Chicago. And I remember passing through Chicago at the time.

The members of the so called unemployed union had to have educational work too. So they'd sit there and they'd read History of Syndicalism, by Levine, an old old book, the history of the IWW, labor papers and all sorts of things. The unemployed union would hold street meetings. There's a very humorous incident here. While I was there I was boarding in a house of a Jewish fellow,, I had a room there. I don't know what I paid him. I think he got three bucks a week or something like that. That was considered a lot of money you know. And he was a commie; I found out that he was a commie. I lived in his house for about three months. I knew him; I knew his kids, his wife. He introduced me to his grandmother; everybody I knew. A typical Jewish family. I don't know what he did for a living. I forgot what it was. I think, he used to work in a place where they knit sweaters. But he was a commie. I didn't pay any attention to that, didn't think anything of it. But then the unemployed union would hold meetings, street meetings. And we'd get up there; I think it was on North Avenue we had meetings, not too far from California, around there, Washtenaw. And we got up there to talk, you know, and all of a sudden the commies came to interrupt; And this guy, my landlord, he said, "I know this fascist. I know this guy. He is being paid by Hearst. How much money he makes from this, to fight the workers." And you know, he was brazen.

So I came back the same day; I had a room in his house. He was kind of shame faced, and he says, "You know how it is." I got rid of him.

Then, I remember, we had a meeting in Grand Circus Park, in Detroit. The anarchists and the Wobblies there used to talk. There was a mayor there named Murphy. He believed in free speech. But the radicals there didn't believe in free speech, So Murphy, the mayor, he says, "I'm impartial." He says, "Here you've got Grand Circus Park; everybody can talk, And if you're fighting around the way you're fighting around, I'm going to see to it that each one gets equal time. You can have that corner of this spot for half an hour and the commies can have that spot for an hour or whatever it is. You shouldn't fight about it." But the commies didn't like that; they didn't like that at all. And they used to come around all the time to disrupt them damn meetings. So finally they got an educational committee of the Wobblies to keep order. So they planted the Wobblies in the crowd, They had saps, heavy sticks, wrapped in the Daily Worker. And the fellow on the box, he'd get up and he'd say, "You ain't got the guts enough to acknowledge that you're commies. I dare you, if you're commies, raise your hand. Be a man." The minute they raised their hand, bang! They went to work on them. In two minutes they all collapsed. And when the police came around they found lead pipes wrapped up in Daily Workers. Then they never bothered with the Wobblies anymore.

Sam Dolgoff: Do you remember that incident on McDougal Street? [To Esther.] You tell it.

Esther Dolgoff: Well, the thing was this, the IWW used to conduct street corner meetings. This was before the war, the second world war. It was after the Spanish War, before the second world war. See the idea was that fascism was still rampant, that they had physically won out, and with so many people if you win the thing materially, then you've won it spiritually too. Anyway, the fascists were rearing their heads, and we had conducted a series of street corner meetings in which there was kind of battles. They'd come back and some of the boys actually got beat up. And the communists also did their part, of beating people up. Blackwell, who had been in Spain and who had not worked with the communists. He was in the Libertarian League; he was also a member of the Wobblies. When he went to Spain, he was with the POUM. He became more and more libertarian in his ideas, after he saw what happened in Spain. One time he was walking with his child in a baby carriage and they beat him up. The communists used to do that, They carried the strong arm squad to the United States and they beat him up, They beat him up badly. It didn't matter to them that he had a baby in the carriage. But that's besides the point. The IWW and other libertarians, anarchists, they would carry out street corner meetings, mostly the Wobblies at that time. To say about fascism, the rise of fascism, We had a meeting on McDougal Street telling about the IWW and at first there was [break in original]

And some of them heard Sam's name. I don't know if he told you about that. And they began with their fascistic, racist ideas, we call it racist now. They yelled "Sam, Sam," with a Jewish accent. "Go back where you came from, Sam, Sam." And they kept it up. And the people coming out of the saloons, the village has plenty of them, especially McDougal Street, they kept up this sing song. And one woman said, "Let's throw him off the box." A nice dressed woman; she was very stylish. And she says, "Let's dump the box." Well Sam stood there for all this while. And finally, silence had its effect, And finally they stopped. And Sam said, "I've been hearing that I should go back to where I came from. In the words of the famous Dr. Gish, it's a physiological and biological impossibility." And that broke the ice; everybody started laughing. And he gave his speech and the usual questions were asked. "You're just working against your country, patriotism, my son..."

Sam said he ought to be ashamed of himself, he has a son that means so little to him he's willing to send him off to imperialist wars. And that's that. I won't recapitulate the whole speech. But the idea was that there was a moral victory. For instance, we talked to people a great deal. As I said, they heckled,

We held the attention, but still there were stragglers that heckled. There was a man and he was putting out literature and so I said, "Why don't you listen?" He said, "Well, I believe in free speech." I said, "No, you don't," He said, "I'm a professor at New York University." I said, "Shame on you This is an open air class. Do you allow people in your class to heckle you? We have a question period, even a discussion period. You can get up and say your piece. And if you don't like that, you go across the corner; you get yourself a box; and you get up and try to hold a crowd. This is an open air class. And you don't know anything about free speech and you claim that you teach in New York University." So, he became apologetic and he took some of the literature to save his face. And made a joke of it. The cops kept pushing the drunks into the meeting. And there was one fellow by the name of Freddy Miller. He's dead and gone but he was a saint, a walking saint. And he says to the cops, "What are you doing, pushing these drunks in here?" He says, "This is a class, this is a meeting of the IWW. Your job is to take the drunks out of the meeting." And anyway, we won morally. We held our ground. Before Sam got off, he says, "Now I want it to be as quiet for the next speaker, Fellow Worker, as it was for me. You've behaved yourselves, finally, beyond reproach. Now listen to the next fellow worker the way you have to

me.” And we had a moral victory, What happened? ”Oh, my uncle was an IWW. He was an old timer. I remember him.” ’My father was a member of the IWW.” Everybody became members-of the IWW. But it was a very exciting meeting. And I think that those that were present were bound to have learned something. A thing like that has an effect on people. Because Wobblies, the ones that I remember, all had a sense of humor. They were able to speak in their own language; they had in fact developed a kind of language. It was humorous. It also came from their practical life so it had vitality. It wasn’t just phrases. So, it went over with a bang. We had a moral victory. They asked questions and they got up on the box. After that they wanted to buy the speakers drinks. In fact the worst heckler took Sam in for a couple of beers. This is a true story.

There were other things that were outstanding. For instance, in that book that was put out, supposed to be sympathetic to the Wobblies, used to sell for twelve dollars. I forgot her name, Cornfeld or something. She was supposed to have some sociological essays or excerpts, and there they talk about the Wobblies being misfits, and they talk about them being the bummary. In fact, the respectable working class used to call them the bummary.

Sam Dolgoff: The SLP called us the bummary. The Detroit Wobblies used to call the Chicago Wobblies the bummary, And the Detroit Wobblies were run by the SLP, headed by Daniel DeLeon.

Esther Dolgoff: Now in answer to this sociological study, and this was supposed to be sympathetic and she has quite a nice few poems that were written by Wobblies and songs, but in answer to her sociology, we’re happy, we’re proud of the fact. Like Hannah Arendt talks about these perfectly normal people who fitted so well into Hitler’s regime. I happened to write a review of her book, and I said, we’re very proud of these ill fitting people with all their quirks, who stand up on their two feet and see the injustice. And try to do some- thing about it. That’s not sick; it’s healthy. And so, they called us the bummary.

There was an esprit de corps with the Wobblies, I don’t know if it’s still with the young people. You could come into any Wobblies house and if they knew you were a Wobbly the door was open, They would share pot luck, whatever they had, their food, their clothes, everything. And you’d be surprised, there are incidents always in any organization, especially a mass organization, but what solidarity there really was. I know that the sailors, they came off the ships, they always asked, they didn’t even have to ask, they would hand, they called it piece off, they would hand some of their wages, some of their money to fellow workers that had come to the hall and piece each one off. In case they weren’t working and they needed it. It wasn’t a question of charity or asking you if you needed it; it just was done. Of course, with that, a lot of it was wasted because, well I’m a teetotaler, but that’s part of it I guess. There’d be quite a bit of drinking. But, as I told the woman who was here yesterday, every Wobbly Hall had a very good library.

And every Wobbly branch or hall tried to have forums. That was not the business meetings but forums to which the outside would be invited and try to have speakers. And then they would have Class War Prisoners Balls, around Christmas time, to gather funds for any class war prisoner, didn’t matter whether he was a member of the IWW or not. Then of course they had monthly dinners to help pay for the expenses of the Hall. The young Wobblies used to have their own meetings. They were taught how to run a meeting, I remember when our young people, when my son was a youngster, a teenager, that there was a young fellow, the secretary of the hall, and he took these young kids and he said, ”Now you’re chairman. You run the meeting.” And they talked about rules of order. And my son, coming from our household, I don’t know if he got it from us, but he had that feeling, what do you need all these rules of order? But, they said, ”This is the way the Wobblies run the meetings.” And each one was given a chance to learn how to run the

meeting and also how to take care of the books. So it was no mystery. Each committee, appointed at the meeting, would go to look at the books, audit the books," Which is quite a democratic procedure. They had a very simple system of auditing the books. Now the boys were taught that. One time we went to a meeting, which was not a Wobbly meeting and they said, "What do we need a chairman for?" And the first fellow who got there and had the loudest voice, he did all the speaking. And I said, my son was present, and I said, "you see why we have the rules of order? So that everybody had a chance, not the one who's loudest or has the most dominant personality. So this is very important. The reason that I bring this up is not just that I'm wandering. It's that I've been present at quite a few meetings of the so called young left, and they don't know how to conduct a meeting. It was amazing to me. It was absolutely amazing. A big meeting, it wasn't a mass meeting, it was a convention or a conference where people came from different parts of the country. They probably came there with something to say or they wouldn't have made the trip. They would get up to speak, and then someone would come and cut in on them, and it was a mish mosh. By the time you were through, no one heard anyone. Now that is a disgrace. Because the humble Wobblies, these bums, they at least knew how to conduct their meetings. And I think that's very important, It's the basis of democracy. You have in the other unions where they don't give you a chance, it's all taken care of before hand and they go through a kind of symbolic or hypocritical procedure.

Ann Allen: The Wobblies were one of the few unions with blacks in it.

Esther Dolgoff: Oh yes. Down south they had some of the first meetings for blacks and whites; they had to have them in the open air.

Sam Dolgoff: Did I ever tell you about Ben Fletcher in Norfolk, Virginia? Ben Fletcher was addressing a meeting in Norfolk, Virginia, and you know Ben Fletcher was very, very black. And he was talking about racial equality and so forth and so on. Some of the racists in the crowd, the white racists, wanted to embarrass him or get him to say something that would provoke a riot. So they asked him a question. They said, "Ben, what do you think of a black man living with a white woman? Ben looked around, he looked all around. He said, "I don't see many people here that's any blacker than me."

Esther Dolgoff: When Ben Fletcher was in jail the trustee was a colored fellow but he made life miserable for him. Because everyone was against the IWW; called it the I "trouble-u trouble-u," and "I won't work." They were supposed to be criminal syndicalists. There was a great persecution of the IWW, And the jail, which is a reflection of the society outside, there's quite a few articles on that subject in the English Anarchy magazine, but that's another thing. But he was miserable to him. But when Ben Fletcher got out, he was walking along the street and this trustee had gotten out by that time and he met him. And the trustee, he said, black as he was, he turned white when he saw Ben. But Ben, he went up to him and said, "How do you do? How do you feel?" And he was able to talk to him and start some ideas in his head, But that's the kind of man that he was. He was quite brilliant and he was a printer, in Philadelphia, Then he worked for the longshoremen. He organized thousands on the docks in Philadelphia. But what gets me is the things that they called for, it seems cruel that they would have to fight that hard. For instance, to have grappling irons, not to grab the freight when it came in by the hands. You wouldn't think that they'd have to fight so hard for it. Now of course it's all mechanized but not at that time. When he was so crippled the FBI still followed him around, fearing his powers to organize. He had beautiful English, beautiful diction. He was a printer and he started early to be interested in social questions. And so he fought for the IWW. And I've often wondered, here is a bona fide,

true blue hero. They have such characters that they choose as their symbols, the colored people. And no one hears of him. You know, when he was jailed against the first world war and they gave him ten years, they gave long sentences then.- His turn came up and the judge said, "Have you anything to say?" He says, "Your grammar's very poor judge, and your sentences are too long." He was a well read man, He had a dignity, and he worked hard for his living. He was no pie card artist, As I told you, he was so crippled, he had to push the dolly. We had so many of these people, so devoted. And that's what an organization needs, very devoted and idealistic people.

Ann Allen: What about the women?

Esther Dolgoff: Well many of them even when they were old, when the Wobblies were not a force, wherever they worked, for instance, this woman that I'm speaking of, she came to a shop to work and the toilet was stuffed, it ran into the shop itself, It was supposed to be a very fine shop, but this is how the workers were. Many of the things Wobblies took for granted that they should be rectified, in fact, any union. But there was a laxity. The worker was so afraid, especially the older worker, of being fired, and when he's fired he loses his medicare, a whole series of things. What we used to call quenching the fires of revolution with a bowl of soup. So this woman, being an old lady, and the others were quite a few older ones there, got together. She convinced them that it was within their rights and they had every right to see that sanitary conditions were there. Mostly they were Italian women that were there. In the end they won out. They got everything and they made a party for that same woman and they gave her a gift. But see, a Wobbly always had more influence than their physical numbers were. Their greatest trick was in being the conscience of the labor movement. And every labor movement, I don't care, every organization, needs a conscience. Every social movement needs a conscience. They were very active. And their greatest work was when they pushed the AFL and the other unions more to the left. And some of the things, like not crossing the picket line, the Wobblies were not the only ones who said that, but this is what they put their emphasis on. On solidarity, on not crossing the picket line, on never sabotaging another working class organization. As I said, it's very important to have a conscience.

Ann Allen: What about Matilda Robbins?

Esther Dolgoff: I didn't know her but I read her things. She was on the lecture tour. I may have seen her at meetings, but I don't remember. But she was a very beautiful writer. You can look up her articles and her poems. We had any number of good women writers. Then we had, as I said, a college here in New York city.

Ann Allen: What kind of a college?

Esther Dolgoff: It was on 94 (?) Fifth Avenue was the address. One old fellow worker came forward, he taught speech at, I think it was New York University. Another man worked on the New York Times and he was a reporter. He knew about journalism. There were any number of people who came forward; from their professions, to teach. Now the people came from work, they didn't have an opportunity to go out or home, so the women made food which was sold at very small prices. So that people could get a sandwich and coffee and salad, you know. And the women also practiced what they learned in the classes. One place that I was interested in, or took part in, was the class in speech. And all term we had to get in front of the class. First we stood up by our seat, and said who we-were and etc. Then we had to put on a formal speech. Then the graduating class, we had a soap box out on the corner with a big sign- Graduating Class IWW Speech Class. We had to get up on the box and make a speech; Let me tell you, it was very different than getting up in class or speaking in front of a little group. You'd be shaking. And

its very hard to maintain an audience. But the public was very, very interested. And proud, they thought we did something wonderful. It was the depths of the depression,

Ann Allen: What other kind of classes did they have besides speech?

Esther Dolgoff: Journalism. They would do simple pieces up for the IW. And they had art classes and you'd be surprised what beautiful, beautiful things they did,

You could throw me over with a feather, the ones that did the most beautiful work. The ones you least suspected. Not only that, but a place where people come together for something creative is always stimulating. It always gives a good feeling and it always leads to better things.

Ann Allen: What about child care?

Esther Dolgoff: Well, I suppose in the other days when people went to work. I wouldn't know too much about that, We helped each other out. Sometimes when I think back, I was a Catholic Worker all by myself. It wasn't charity, I can't even call it social services, it was friendship really. I'd have people walking in with a child. They had to go to the doctor and they didn't know where to leave the other baby. They had to buy a pair of shoes or they just wanted to visit. It got to be very difficult, because, as I said, in every mass organization, not everybody is of the same background. And some people looked at it, either you're a fool because they know they have to pay babysitters, or that you're stupid. Or they, I don't know how to explain it. But after a while I told one person, "Has it ever occurred to you that we have a group of people who look at things differently? So what may be to you stupidity, to us is very important?" Such a thing as friendship, hospitality concern over a young kid who was stranded,- he has a check to pay for his room but they won't accept the check.

Ann Allen: Did the women in the Wobblies do a lot of direct organizing?

Esther Dolgoff: Why yes I told you. Sure they did. Women organized wherever they were. That's the strength of a Wobbly. Wherever they were they were able to give an incentive or an outlook to the worker. This is a case that I know. They went because everybody was working and I had time; my kids were in school at that time; so I had free time. And they all thought it was a wonderful idea, that we should do something for the workers of Spain; and nothing happened. They kept putting us off. I kept going there, and I got so sick and tired of it. But Norman Thomas was not in town, so whole organizations were paralyzed. Nobody did anything because the leader wasn't there. I said, but you agreed to it. It's important. Time is being wasted; This was really to save lives. There were 11 comrades, fellow workers, that were up for execution. And all over the world were protests. There were posters in France as big as this wall. They said, "Down With The Assassins." Big yellow posters with great big black letters. And the leading people all over the world were protesting this massacre. Because these people had not only fought against Franco; they fought in the resistance in France.- Some of them were internationally known people. And they came back to Spain and at this late date they were carrying out their vendetta. So we had this thing before us. We said, time is of the essence, why can't you start doing things? So they waited and finally Norman Thomas came. And I went there with Blackwell. As I said, I had time, I don't want to give myself undue credit, you know, the women. And we had to educate Thomas actually, because he had been away. He responded beautifully to it. We had meetings of several organizations. And we knew that we'd have to be the Jimmy Higgins, because it was our thing. We gave the money to print the leaflets. To start the thing going. And we took the background, because we were interested in saving lives. And we had some wonderful response from people that had gone far away from this scene. They had climbed up the ladder so beautifully. Later on of course it gets to be a routine thing and only the very interested people come. I remember that

people we didn't meet for years had showed up. Through our protests, five people were saved and six were executed. We felt that we were part of that big movement to protest such a massacre. The Wobblies did take part in that; they initiated it, you see. And the women did take part, And we were able to see the difference, with all the faults; of a libertarian organization; at least there was no hierarchy. We sometimes think it's too loose; that's what we were complaining about. But everybody is motivated. We made calls to different organizations. Sam and the Blackwells sat up one night to compose a telegram which would be acceptable to Green, at that time they had a convention, to present the protest of one labor movement to another. They did take it up, in fact they said it could have been a bit stronger. But that's how history is written. A fellow like Green could get up and speak his piece but it was written by the Wobblies. But they did make a protest; it's better than letting it go as if nobody cared. And five people were saved. And the criticism: They said to us, "Ha, you're going with Norman Thomas." The purists, you know, they were doing nothing most of the time. And I told them, when a person is dead, that's the end, And these are comrades. If we had to get down on our knees and actually kiss the behind of the pope, if we felt he could save all of them, we'd do it. Because when you're dead, that's the end. And so, quite a few interesting things that I've seen. And the years went by. And when I stop to think, what did I do? It's just on a larger scale, everything. Instead of better, it's gotten worse. Because the way things in Spain failed, that to me was the turning point.

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



Ann Allen, Sam Dolgoff, Esther Dolgoff
Interview with Sam and Esther Dolgoff
1972

interview by Ann Allen for the Roosevelt University Oral History Project in Labor History
recorded June 15, 1972, New York City. Proof-read, corrected from version on libcom.org
Proof-read, corrected from version on libcom.org

en.anarchistlibraries.net