
“Big Bill” on Kuznets Basin

by Tom Barker

Federated Press Staff Correspondent

Published in the Federated Press Bulletin [Chicago], v. 2, no. 1 (Oct. 8, 1921), pg. 7.

MOSCOW, Sept. 3 [1921] (By Mail). — “Bill” Haywood is staying in the same hotel as myself. Bill is losing weight these days, like the rest of us. Only a real Russian can get well-rounded on what we from the outside eat.

But “Bill’s” mind is far away. Oh no, it is not fixed on the land where he faced the electric chair for the Steunenberg affair, nor where a muddy-minded judge gave him 20 years for being a member of the fighting IWW, the most cosmopolitan labor union in the world. No, “Bill’s” mind is turned to the East, a long way East from the golden domes of Red Moscow.

Away beyond the Arabs, in the heart of Northern Asia, he pictures a mighty industrial center without a boss, under the control of the outlawed and rejected IWW. All there in the vast land which a few years ago was the penitentiary of the Russian tsar and the grave of both the living and the dead. A land of quick and sudden summers and of long and bitter winters with tiny days and long, long nights.

“Say, you!” says “Bill,” “What d’ye want to go back to Chicago or Buenos Aires for? Why here’s Calvert just expressing himself in a letter about Kuznets Basin, and by God, it’s the place for a Wobbly to go. We have a batch of 160 boys here at the Mamenteo Hotel, who arrived two days ago from Seattle through Siberia, and they are going back there soon.”

And so, being an IWW since 1912, I was interested, and as fascinated as “Bill” himself, with the idea of building an industrial democracy from the bottom up, far from the shackles of capitalism and with all the eyes of this great revolutionary country watching the Industrial Workers of the World as they deal with the question of production.

Kuznets Basin is the center of Asiatic industry. An almost unlimited supply of immediately accessible coal of good quality. Iron ore with smelters and forges ready to turn out 20 tons a day. The miners ready for getting coal immediately for a coke and chemical plant. Magnificent farming country all around with the best soil in the world, and all the fine spruce and cedar that you need up the river. And Kuznets lies 120 miles south of the city of Tomsk, on the Siberian railway. A branch line in very good order connects the two centers, as also does a mighty and lordly river, the Tomsk.

And so I read Calvert’s letter. It breathes of a youthful optimism that has infected the old war horse with scarred face, who regards me questioningly with one eye. For Calvert is little more than a lad, who has worked in Henry Ford’s plant, and maybe thereby has more than a sneaking regard for the genius of his one-time boss. After a busy day in Mos-

cow he had poured a story in the ears of the chiefs and then with [S.J.] Rutgers, a Communist engineer from Holland; Feltman, an old scarred warrior of the IWW, who knows nearly every mine in the US and came into Russia through the Polish front and straight from an Arizona jail, and a Wobbly lumber expert, they went to Kuznets to view what American capitalism had bequeathed by stampeding in the first palpitating days of the Russian revolution.

"Damn it all, man!" says "Bill," "This is the biggest thing on earth. Everything ready to our hands. New houses, chimney stacks, drives, cross-shafts, streets, cable carriers, buildings, chemical plant, river and rail. Timber land and farming ground ready for a tractor. River and rail alongside of the work. And all ready for US, the IWW, to begin with. We'll have to before the winter starts, and early next spring we'll have 2800 Russian-American emigrants with about 600 real Wobblies on the job. Before 1922 is out there will be 10,000 workers in the Kuznets Basin. This is the biggest thing in the world! Russia needs us, and we the Wobblies, we KNOW industry, and from Kuznets Basin we'll rebuild Siberia and help save Russia. Quit the outside work and let's

make it a success. Are you on?"

And old Jack Byer blows in with 63 years on his head and a face like a hard-bitten movie actor, and he's going, like Calvert to run the bosses' property that was in the isolation of the Northern plains.

And so we are getting ready, getting tools and clothes, the procuring of which is like drawing teeth, but we will get them. For winter will be hard and cold. Like "Bill," I grow hot and cold. We, the rejected, the jailed, and the deported, running industry and putting across the things we've taught, demonstrated, and have been jailed. A new civilization from the strong arms and the clear brains of the class-conscious proletariat of the Western world. And like "Bill," I itch for the time when my body will be where my mind is.

In a few days I shall accompany an expedition to the Basin, headed by Haywood, comprising some 200 American IWWs. They have a mandate from the All-Russian Council of Labor and Defense and the Siberian Revolutionary Committee. We believe that this will prove to be one of the most stupendous experiments of a social and economic character in history.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

Published by 1000 Flowers Publishing Corvallis, OR, 2009. • Non-commercial reproduction permitted.