

# ◀◀ KAPITAL: Historic Background ▶▶

## — Real People, Real Events —

The entire series is a flashback of events described by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in a talk to college students in 1962 when Flynn, at the age of 72, was nearing the end of her life. Flynn narrates a tale of American society in the early 1900s — a time consumed with an explosive mix of class-consciousness, economic progress, social reform, unbridled wealth, outrageous greed, abject poverty, marvelous inventions, and radical ideas.

It was the Progressive Era — a time of crusading reformers, immigrant hordes, autocratic capitalists, marching suffragettes, bohemian anarchists, and a devoutly partisan press. The epoch also marked the start of modern art and the beginning of the mobile age. It ushered in the first “golden age” of advertising and offered up tempting tastes of “must-have” consumer products. And in that time was honed a radical and daring concept that a new magical industry called “public relations” could actually *alter* public perceptions of *reality*.

During those chaotic decades, William “Big Bill” Haywood, Elizabeth “Gurley” Flynn, and a mysterious Swede by the name of Joseph Hillstrom — “Joe Hill” — championed the cause of the working stiff, the immigrant, the downtrodden, and the dispossessed. They inspired, organized, and agitated among the working class in an all-out effort to topple “robber baron” industrialists and their minions from their perches of power and influence over the country’s economic and political systems.

The three working-class radicals were bound together by the militant Industrial Workers of the World — “the Wobblies.” Haywood led the extolled *and reviled* headline-grabbing IWW. Flynn and Hill were among its most storied members.

## — “One Big Union” —

The Wobblies were not subtle in their ideals or their actions. In opening the IWW’s founding convention in 1905, Haywood declared: “We are here to confederate the workers of this country into a working class movement that shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working class from the slave bondage of capitalism.” The IWW sought nothing less than to unite the *entire working class* into “One Big Union.”

Wobblies organized the “unorganizable” — meaning the unskilled and foreign-born. They also brought black, white, and women workers together at a time when separate “colored” and “women’s” unions were the norm. The ultimate goal of the IWW was to organize on a mass scale and wage paralyzing “general strikes” that would lead to the overthrow of the capitalists’ reign and usher in a new economic system controlled in its entirety by the working class. It was a woefully naive and terribly flawed grand stratagem.

From their point of view, the Wobblies were engaged in nothing less than an epic and uncompromising struggle to create a new economic order for the nation. Their elusive dream was to refashion the social fabric of the United States and imbue the country with a working-class soul. And Haywood, Flynn, and Hill achieved near mythic status as they tried. Yet, their lives were all too real, filled with joy and love, demons and dissonance, and in Haywood’s case — self-destructive tendencies.

### — Haywood —

Haywood was born before the railroad spanned the country. He was a product of the still wild West. His ideology was shaped in the brutally dangerous hard rock mines of Idaho and Colorado, where he began his labor career. For nearly two decades, Haywood forged the Wobblies into a revolutionary union that was forever fighting and defying the captains of industry in the early heyday of American industrialism.

Haywood drank too much. He philandered. He engaged in fisticuffs and gunfights, but rarely swore. Among Haywood's strengths was his genius for expression in rousing the rabble — the illiterate and foreign-born — to take action against their “oppressors.” He used simple words and pitches of voice to incite those who could hardly speak one word of English, yet could understand nearly every word he said. In his trademark style, Haywood would count things off with each finger of his hand, make a fist, and make his point.

In 1907, Haywood was the principal defendant in what was dubbed the “Trial of the Century” — accused of masterminding the assassination of Idaho's former governor. The trial was news across the world. And on his acquittal — after a brilliant defense mounted by his lawyer, the mesmerizing Clarence Darrow — Haywood became an instant working-class hero, an international celebrity, and a vexing adversary to the nation's moneyed interests.

### — Flynn —

Flynn was a child prodigy raised in New York City by doting working-class socialist parents. Flynn was among the best orators of the day at a time when virtuoso orators were idolized in American society. Already an accomplished speaker at the age of 15 — having honed her art under the tutelage of seasoned agitators — a *Boston Globe* reporter noted: “She possesses an eloquence of expression and lucidity of thought that have surprised experienced speakers and even professional radicals.”

Flynn was lauded by some as a “modern day Joan of Arc” and demonized by others as “one of the most dangerous persons alive.” At 16, Flynn joined the Wobbly cause. At 17, she married a fellow Wobbly. By 19, she was divorced. During her rocky marriage, Flynn gave birth twice. One child died. One survived. Flynn never wed again, but she took a charismatic live-in lover — a married Italian anarchist.

### — Joe Hill —

Wobblies used song, satire, and street theater to connect with their diverse working class audiences. The IWW's “Little Red Songbook” featuring sarcastic ditties and inspirational anthems — and rooted in popular culture — created instant comradeship among the masses. Joe Hill was the Wobblies' most famous troubadour.

Hill was an itinerant Wobbly poet, musician, and lyricist whose musical allegories poked fun at the excesses of the ruling class, poignantly portrayed the plight of the oppressed, and skewered “traitors” to the working class. And while Hill is unknown to most Americans, or viewed merely as a colorful minor character in U.S. history (like Johnny Appleseed), or even as a fictional one (like Paul Bunyan), his influence on the American language is evident everyday — his unique voice having given us the idiom “pie in the sky” among other things.

— **“The Strike!”** —

The Wobblies’ strategy of choice to “emancipate” the working class was “direct action.” Their tactic of choice was militant disobedience. Their ultimate weapon was “The Strike!” For nearly two decades, Wobblies across the country initiated nonviolent disruptions — which nearly always elicited violent reactions from their foes.

Though committed to the idea of nonviolent protest, Wobblies were hardly ready to turn the other cheek. Violence against them was often met with violence *from* them. In 1909, during a IWW-led strike of 6,000 workers against U.S. Steel, they promised to take one state trooper’s life for every worker killed. In one battle, four strikers and three troopers died.

— **Free Speech** —

In spite of the U.S. Steel violence, another fight in 1909 vividly portrayed the Wobblies’ skillful use of peaceful disobedience. When the elected officials of Spokane, Wash. outlawed “street speaking” — the Wobblies’ principal organizing tool — Wobblies by the hundreds descended on the city in a disciplined and well-planned counteroffensive. One after another, Wobblies jumped on soapboxes in direct defiance of the law and were quickly carted off to jail, including a 19-year-old — and very pregnant — Gurley Flynn. Spokane’s jails and other holding pens soon became so absurdly overrun by these unwashed — and singing — rabble-rousers that the city fathers had no choice but to revoke the ban.

Wobbly “Free Speech” fights using similar tactics were successfully waged in some two dozen cities in the decade that followed. To put these actions into a historic context, it should be noted that they took place nearly a half-century before the civil rights and anti-war movements in the United States adopted like-minded tactics — and decades before Gandhi effectively employed such nonviolent measures.

— **“... And Roses Too!”** —

On Jan. 10, 1912, roughly 25,000 immigrant workers— speaking some 30 different languages — struck the mills of Lawrence, Mass., over wage cuts. They turned to the IWW to lead them. When the two lead IWW organizers were arrested on trumped-up murder charges, Flynn took on a critical leadership role. She was aided by an Italian anarchist, Carlo Tresca, who soon became her lover. Haywood also periodically took the reins in Lawrence, inspiring the legions of foreign-born workers in fiery speeches that made headlines across the globe.

Wobblies were superb artisans in crafting compelling storylines for their struggles. And without question, the Lawrence strike was a masterpiece of their propaganda wizardry. A picket sign declaring “We Want Bread. And Roses Too!” — a plea for human dignity — forever gave the strike its defining and quintessential theme.

In a brilliant act of organizing, Flynn orchestrated the exodus of hundreds of strikers’ children by train to New York City where they were to be temporarily adopted by sympathetic families. The “child heroes” were greeted at Grand Central Terminal by 5,000 people who hoisted them onto their shoulders as strains of “The Marseillaise” echoed throughout the cavernous space. Flynn’s adroit handling of the undertaking dramatically spotlighted the Lawrence workers’ struggle. Sixty-three days after the strike began, the mill owners conceded defeat — meeting each and every one of the strikers’ demands.

### — Wobbly Martyrdom —

Despite some dramatic, though sporadic, Wobbly victories, industrialists and their backers long held the upper hand in keeping workers in their place and unions at bay. Robber barons relied on high unemployment rates, racial and ethnic prejudices, Pinkerton spies, and thuggery to foment fear in the workplace. And when those tactics didn't work, industrialists (often with state support) organized their own private armies to enforce their edicts — often violently — and nearly always with impunity. Wobbly organizers were routinely arrested, brutally beaten, or just run out of town without even the benefit of a good night's sleep in jail. Other Wobbly agitators were simply killed.

In 1916, a contingent of some 250 IWW activists made their way by ferry to Everett, Wash., to challenge en masse — as was the Wobbly way — a ban on street speaking. But before their ferry even docked, it was fired on by 200 “citizen deputies” who were told they were anarchists. In the end, some dozen Wobblies were dead and scores more wounded. On that bloody Sunday, the Everett “free speech” fight became the “Everett Massacre.”

In 1917, some 1,200 striking Wobbly copper miners were expelled from Bisbee, Ariz., when vigilantes herded them into filthy boxcars, took them over the New Mexico border and dumped them out. A worse fate befell the strike's leader, Frank Little, who was beaten, dragged behind an automobile — and only then, lynched on a railroad trestle.

In 1919, on Armistice Day, American Legionnaires attacked the IWW union hall in Centralia, Wash. Wobblies fired back, killing three. Wobbly Wesley Everest (a veteran in his uniform) was captured. That night, vigilantes — aided by the town's mayor — dragged Everest out of jail, castrated him, lynched him, and then riddled his body with bullets.

### — “Don't Mourn. Organize!” —

The Wobblies' most famous martyr, however, was Joe Hill. In 1915, Hill was convicted of killing a Utah grocer in a case based solely on circumstantial evidence. He was executed some 21 months later despite worldwide protests. Hill claimed to have an alibi — that he was with a married woman at the time — yet, he refused to offer proof of it. Some say Hill had no alibi, just the desperate lies of a guilty man. Others contend he planned his own martyrdom to benefit the Wobbly cause. While still others claim the business-oriented and vastly influential Mormon Church pressed for his demise.

As he awaited certain death, Hill composed *The Rebel Girl* as both an honor to Flynn and an ode to all rebellious women. In a telegram to Haywood on the eve of his execution, Hill penned his famous epitaph, "Don't mourn. Organize!" And while Hill's martyrdom inspired many, it also signaled to some extent the beginning of the end.

### — Changing Times —

The United States of 1915 was a far different place than the nation of 1905, when the IWW was founded. “Progressive” legislation abolished or tempered industrialism's most egregious ills — muting, to some extent, the Wobblies' cries of working-class oppression. In the midst of the first “golden age” of advertising, members of the working class were also becoming more consumer-oriented. An 8-hour workday brought leisure time. Newfangled appliances eased the drudgery of domestic life. Dreams of the trappings of a middle-class life were quickly replacing the fantasies of a workers' paradise — *and the will to fight for one.*

### — World War I & the Wobbly Demise —

As World War I raged in Europe in 1916, the IWW Executive Board declared: “We will resist with all the power of our command any attempt to compel us — the disinherited — to participate in a war that can only bring in its wake death and untold misery, privation, and suffering to millions of workers, and only serve to further rivet the chains of slavery on our necks.” The Wobbly propaganda machine was churning. But so was the government’s.

In an unprecedented and audacious move, the White House established a Committee on Public Information (CPI) to market the war — much like the booming advertising industry had been promoting the latest brands of tooth powder and patent medicines. And so, while the Wobblies were on their soapboxes preaching about the sins of a wicked war to anyone who would listen, members of the CPI’s army of “influential citizens” were inside movie houses preaching the gospel of a “noble cause” and “just war” to captive audiences.

Like Theodore Roosevelt before him, Woodrow Wilson (a friend of “mainstream” labor) had grown weary of the trouble-making Wobblies and their “Bolshevik” ideology. World War I offered the perfect rationale to smother the Wobblies’ smoldering rebellion.

In September 1917, federal agents simultaneously raided 48 Wobbly meeting halls across the country, seizing “evidence” of IWW subversion and arresting 168 Wobbly activists. In April 1918, 101 Wobbly leaders, including Haywood, went on trial for conspiring to hinder the draft, encouraging desertion, and other acts of treason. Their trial lasted five months. (It was the longest criminal trial in U.S. history up to that point.) The jury found them all guilty. They each received lengthy prison sentences.

### — The Bitter End —

The Wobblies — with Haywood at the helm, Flynn on its soapbox, and Hill with his guitar — may have set out to destroy an imperfect system in order to build a “better” one. In the end, it was the Wobblies who were destroyed — and with them, “Big Bill” Haywood.

A beaten and bitter Haywood watched helplessly as his most trusted lieutenants were carted off to Leavenworth. Unlike them, Haywood jumped bail and fled to the Soviet Union (at the behest of Vladimir Lenin) where he died a crushed and disillusioned man in 1928. Flynn, disheartened by a succession of Wobbly losses and scornful of Haywood’s rigid leadership, left the IWW before the final deathblow came crashing down upon them. She remained steadfast in her convictions and went on to live a long and unwavering radical life.

### — Other Players —

Besides Haywood, Flynn, and Hill, other notable “radicals” highlighted in the miniseries include Mother Jones, the “hell-raising” grandmotherly agitator; Eugene Debs, the socialists’ favorite son; Emma Goldman, the incorrigible anarchist; James Connolly, the martyred Irish rebel; Mabel Dodge, the flamboyant hostess of Greenwich Village salon society; and Mary Vorse and John Reed, the legendary chroniclers of those spirited times.

Other historic personages include: Woodrow Wilson, Teddy Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Ethel Barrymore, Mark Twain, Clarence Darrow, Walter Lippmann, Theodore Dreiser, J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie. Carl Sandburg appears as a sympathetic reporter and future Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas as a youthful vagabond.

— The Specter of History —

*Yet, the real facts of history may be the most compelling supporting characters of all.* For, **KAPITAL** is also the story of:

- ❖ Decadent wealth and dire poverty,
- ❖ Unbridled corporate power and labor insurrection,
- ❖ Terrorists, provocateurs, orators, and pandering politicians,
- ❖ Immigrant masses and massive prejudice and discrimination,
- ❖ Righteous beliefs, progressive ideas, and emerging consumerism,
- ❖ Military authorities defying the rule of law in the name of national security,
- ❖ And an elaborately crafted and successful plan by White House operatives to manipulate public opinion for political gain.

*Simply put, KAPITAL is a tale of three people, momentous times, and epoch-changing moments.*

It is a story that begins with a plump 72 year-old woman in a frumpy flowery dress entering an ornate university auditorium carrying her purse, a shopping bag, and her fading memories.

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**You don't remember the Wobblies.  
You were too young.  
Or else, not even born yet.  
There has never been anything like them,  
before, or since...  
They were welded together by a vision we  
don't possess.**

— **James Jones**  
*From Here to Eternity*

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