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## “The Workingman of Nazareth”: Representations of Jesus as Laborer in The Masses (1911-1917), the Politics of Jesus’ Profession, and Historical Jesus Debates

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‡ “THE WORKINGMAN OF NAZARETH”: REPRESENTATIONS OF JESUS AS  
LABORER IN *THE MASSES* (1911-1917), THE POLITICS OF JESUS’ PROFESSION,  
AND HISTORICAL JESUS DEBATES ‡

In Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3, Jesus is identified as a son of a *tehton* and a *tehton* in his own right respectively. While traditionally translated as “carpenter,” there is still significant scholarly debate about how the term should actually be translated. This question has become even more complicated by the discovery of Sepphoris, an urban center located less than four miles from Nazareth. Instead of the humble carpenter consistently portrayed in religious iconography, some scholars have begun to “locate Jesus more in the middle-class than in the lower middle-class...than in the lower class of the period.”<sup>1</sup> Others, like Géza Vêrmes come to another conclusion. According to Vermes, “in Talmudic sayings the Aramaic noun denoting carpenter or craftsman (*naggar*) stands for a ‘scholar’ or a ‘learned man,’” meaning that *tehton* might not even have anything to do with Jesus’ profession.<sup>2</sup> And still others maintain the traditional picture of the workingman of Nazareth, occupying the lowest rungs of the social ladder: “‘artisan’ would be maybe our best translation. But in the pecking order of peasant society, a peasant artisan is lower than a peasant farmer. It...means usually a peasant farmer who had been pushed off the land and has to make his living...by laboring.”<sup>3</sup> With such a wide range of interpretations of *tehton*, where are those searching for the real Jesus to turn?

Of course, this debate is neither new nor without political and theological significance. For whether Jesus is a peasant, low-level artisan, or accomplished builder *matters*. While expressly religious movements like the Social Gospel would naturally turn to Jesus as an emblem of their movement,

<sup>1</sup> Holland Lee Hendrix, “Not a Humble Carpenter,” *Jesus’ Many Faces—Jesus’ Social Class*, PBS.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/socialclass.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Géza Vêrmes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1981), 22.

<sup>3</sup> John Dominic Crossan, “A Peasant Boy in a Peasant Village,” *Jesus’ Many Faces—Jesus’ Social Class*, PBS.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/socialclass.html>.

Jesus’ appeal was not limited to this realm.<sup>4</sup> *The Masses*, a socialist magazine that ran from 1911–1917, also joined the debate over the historical, theological and political meaning of *tekton*. In the magazine, Jesus was conceived of as a poor carpenter or laborer—“the workingman of Nazareth”—in order to serve its broader purpose, the promotion of socialism:

This paper belongs to the proletariat. It is the recording secretary of the Revolution in the making. It is the notebook of working class history...It is NOT meant as a foray of unruly truant children trying to sneak into the rich orchards of literature and art. It is an earnest and living thing, a battle call, a shout of defiance, a blazing torch running madly through the night to set afire the powder magazines of the world.<sup>5</sup>

This paper has two aims. First, it proposes that *The Masses*’ conscious depiction of Jesus as laborer from 1911–1917 in order to marshal support for labor unions and critique the church illustrates the theological and political stakes in how scholars describe Jesus’ profession. Secondly, this paper will consider where *The Masses*’ portrayal of Jesus fits into contemporary historical Jesus scholarship, paying special attention to how *The Masses*’ Jesus challenges the goals of contemporary scholarship and suggests new criteria for evaluating what constitutes “good” historical Jesus scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The Masses*—Some Context**

In 1911 Piet Vlag, “a bearded Dutchman more interested in cooperatives than in either art or the social revolution,” founded *The Masses*, but the magazine’s real history began in late 1912 when

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<sup>4</sup> See Eugene Debs, “Jesus is the Supreme Leader”: “[Jesus] was born in a stable and cradled in a manger. This fact of itself, about which there is no question, certifies conclusively the proletarian character of Jesus Christ,” who Debs sees as “the world’s supreme revolutionary leader.” See also Guthrie’s “Jesus Christ,” where he sings: “Jesus Christ was a *hardworking* man and brave.”

<sup>5</sup> Arturo Giovanni, “What I Think of the Masses,” *The Masses*, Vol. 8, No. 9 (July 1916). Emphasis his.

<sup>6</sup> One might question whether *The Masses*’ Jesus and contemporary historical Jesus scholarship even belong in the same discussion, arguing that one is a popular culture representation and the other represents objective scholarship. Such worries are warranted, but, as this paper demonstrates at length, it is not that simple. Both representations are drawing on historical sources, positing a narrative of the life of Jesus from those sources, and, as this paper will spend considerable time arguing, projecting their own biases onto that “historical” work. The lines between popular culture and the historical Jesus are nowhere near as stark and clear as scholars would like to believe, since postmodernism has destabilized the meaning and possibility of objectivity. In addition, the work of David Burns can be helpful in outlining the ways that radical representations of Jesus in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century *were* historical. See David Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 12.

Max Eastman became editor.<sup>7</sup> He was notified of his election by a curt telegram message: “You are elected editor of *The Masses*. No pay.”<sup>8</sup> From 1911-1917 *The Masses* published socialist articles, poetry, and art that, according to one contributor, “attack[ed] old systems, old morals, old prejudices...and set up new ones in their place.”<sup>9</sup> Never reaching a circulation of above 25,000, it was nevertheless influential due to its ties with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century New York’s artist community.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Eastman says it best when he describes *The Masses* as

A revolutionary and not a reform magazine...frank, impertinent, searching for the true causes; a magazine directed against rigidity and dogma wherever it is found: printing what is too naked or true for a money-making press: a magazine whose final policy is to do as it pleases and conciliate nobody, not even its readers.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, such a magazine was bound to run into trouble—in fact that was part of the idea. A socialist press not opposed by authorities is no socialist press at all. In 1913, *The Masses* published a cartoon that depicted the Associated Press as poisoning the news at the source by withholding vital information about a strike (Figure 1) and faced a libel suit. What finally caused the magazine to fail was the its unceasing publication of articles and cartoons opposing World War I.<sup>12</sup> Under the Espionage Act of 1917, the US Post Office refused to deliver *The Masses*, and several members of the editorial board were charged with conspiring to obstruct enlistment. While the editors beat the charges and won an injunction against the Post Office, by that time *The Masses* was finished.<sup>13</sup>

### ***The Masses’* Depictions of Jesus in Context: Some Predecessors**

The following sections analyze several examples of how *The Masses* linked Jesus to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, American class struggle. While the examination is not exhaustive—it does not, for example,

<sup>7</sup> William L. O’Neill, *Echoes of Revolt: The Masses, 1911-1917* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in O’Neil, *Echoes of Revolt*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Keith M. Booker, *Encyclopedia of Literature and Politics: H-R* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 471.

<sup>11</sup> Max Eastman, “Editorial Notice,” *The Masses*, Vol. 4, No. 10 (July 1913): 2.

<sup>12</sup> See Rebecca Zurier, *Art for the Masses: A Radical Magazine and Its Graphics, 1911-1917* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 58; see also Max Eastman, “War for War’s Sake,” *The Masses*, Vol 5, No. 12 (September 1914): 5.

<sup>13</sup> Zurier, *Art for the Masses*, 61.

give significant analysis of the Tannenbaum affair—it does comprise a somewhat representative sample of *The Masses*’ engagement with Jesus as a historical, political, and literary figure.<sup>14</sup> Before delving into these representations, it is important to note that *The Masses*’ work was not anything radically new. In fact, as scholars like Dan McKanan and David Burns have demonstrated in the past several years, the radical Jesus imagined by *The Masses* built on the work of radicals like George Lippard, a Philadelphia novelist and Universalist who, according to McKanan, “fleshed out a vision of Jesus as a class-conscious laborer who proclaimed liberty to the captives and judgment to their oppressors.”<sup>15</sup> Lippard’s Jesus emerged on the scene in his 1847 work *Washington and His Generals* as “the Carpenter of Nazareth resolved to redress the wrongs of the poor.”<sup>16</sup> Lippard’s example prepared the way for others to speak of Jesus as a class-conscious comrade who does battle with the principalities and powers. In fact, McKanan argues, “prior to Lippard, few preachers described Jesus as a workingman,” while the decades leading up to *The Masses* saw a flourishing of radical representations of Jesus that built on Lippard’s ideas.<sup>17</sup>

Lippard’s influence can also be felt with several other radical reformers throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century who built on his conceptualizations of Jesus as a class-conscious carpenter from Galilee.<sup>18</sup> For instance, in 1890, Thomas DeWitt Talmage extolled the virtues of a Christ who works and suffers in the same way as modern workers: “You cannot tell Christ anything new about blistered hands, or aching ankles, or bruised fingers, or stiff joints, or rising in the morning as tired as when you lay down. While yet a boy He knew it all, He felt it all, He suffered it all.”<sup>19</sup> Not only has Christ suffered on the cross for those he loved, he has also shared each and every one of the hardships that

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<sup>14</sup> The Tannenbaum affair refers to an incident in 1914 in which Frank Tannenbaum, an IWW leader, led a group of unemployed workers to St. Alphonsus’ church in New York and occupied it. For an extensive analysis of the Tannenbaum affair and theological/political responses to it, see Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*, 98-103.

<sup>15</sup> Dan McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2011), 113.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters*, 113-122.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas DeWitt Talmage, *From Manger to Throne* (Philadelphia, Historical Publishing Company, 1890), 190.

late 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial workers faced.

Likewise, in his 1895 piece “Christ,” Murphy O’hea claims that because Jesus was “a poor humble carpenter...[a] lowly workingman of the bench, the man of hammer and nails,” the “cause of Labor is holy” and “to defend labor is a virtue, [while] to deprive it of lawful rights [is] a sin, and a crime against the mandates of the Creator himself.”<sup>20</sup> As this paper will later show, *The Masses* will repeat this formula of linking Jesus to a profession and using that connection to posit divine support for the modern cause of labor.

While Talmage and O’hea represent two strategic deployments of Jesus the workingman, any discussion of the radical historical Jesus would be incomplete without reference to Bouck White’s *The Call of the Carpenter*. According to David Burns, the book, published in 1911, helped “the radical historical Jesus bec[o]me a major force among socialists again.”<sup>21</sup> Building on those who came before him, “White ignored the objected boundaries erected by academic divines in order to create a didactic piece of radical art that balanced and incorporated all of the diverse elements that had contributed to the creation of the radical historical Jesus.”<sup>22</sup> White’s Jesus was “a workingman that needeth not be ashamed,” who “emerged from his wage-earner period...[with] an unalienable dignity, matured within him by years of acknowledged mastership as a workman.”<sup>23</sup> Molded by his craft, the Carpenter of Nazareth “declared war on the capitalism of his day because capitalism was declaring war on him.”<sup>24</sup> White’s book on Jesus was not only revolutionary; it was also extraordinarily popular. In 1913, Eugene Debs reviewed it highly, calling it “the best book I have read during the last year” and “the greatest book I have read since ‘Les Miserables.’”<sup>25</sup> Debs was not alone in his review, and several other prominent radicals, clergy, laypeople, and theologians also heaped their praise upon White’s work.

<sup>20</sup> Murphy O’hea, “Christ,” *The Railway Times*, 1 November 1895.

<sup>21</sup> Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*, 82.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Bouck White, *The Call of the Carpenter* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913), 38.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>25</sup> Eugene Debs, “From Eugene V. Debs,” *Life*, Vol. 61. 1261.

While White’s *The Call of the Carpenter* gives a firm foundation for thinking about *The Masses’* depictions of Jesus, it is also instructive in another way. White used the new findings of biblical criticism to develop a portrayal of Jesus that some of his critics disparaged as lacking rigor and objectivity.<sup>26</sup> Obviously, White disagreed, and David Burns argues that there was some credence to his position since “what passed for authoritative declarations [in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century] were often little more than personal opinions garnished with some scripture.”<sup>27</sup> In essence, White claimed that his work was “going to peer behind that imposing façade to the social life of the times—the myriad of slaves toiling in the silver mines of the Athenians, in the vast brick fields of Rome, in the copper mines of Sinai, in galleys on the Mediterranean.”<sup>28</sup> By reading history from below, he insisted that there was enough material to justify his claims about the radical historical Jesus.<sup>29</sup> At the very least, White had as much material on his side as more traditional scholars. For, as one reviewer of White’s *The Call of the Carpenter* so eloquently put it:

We have no way of actually knowing what Jesus did or said, or even whom he was. The records and sayings that have come down to us have passed through so many distortions and corruptions at the hands of priests and vested interests that there is no scientific method of demonstration or proof that can reveal his reality to us. Out of the fragments and distortions we may put together what seems to us his original image and purpose.<sup>30</sup>

White certainly accomplished that feat, but the problem of his time—there was not enough material for definitive statements about the life of Jesus, and scholars, despite their claims to objectivity, were reading what they liked into Jesus’ story—did not go away. Scholars still find in Jesus what they want to find, but they are rarely explicit about their perspective in the way that White is, a point that this paper analyzes in depth in its final section.

### **Jesus Christ, Union Man: Art Young’s Images and Prose**

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<sup>26</sup> Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*, 91.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*, 11.



For its special Christmas issue of 1913, *The Masses* printed a bold, provocative cover image (Figure 2). In the piece illustrated by Art Young, one of *The Masses*' more popular and prolific illustrators, Jesus appears on a poster for an event and is described as "the workingman of Nazareth" who "will speak at Brotherhood Hall" on "the rights of labor."<sup>31</sup> The references to Jesus' profession are clear-cut, leaving nothing to the imagination. While he might also be "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" to many of *The Masses*' readers, here Jesus is simply "the workingman of Nazareth," who, realizing his connection to laborers of every age, stands in solidarity with them and their unions. This Jesus is no master-artisan with a host of underlings to command, like Hendrix might have us believe. Nor is he necessarily Verme's wise teacher. He is simply Jesus—the workingman. In the end, this text represents one of the most overt examples of *The Masses*' deployment of Jesus' profession to drum up support for labor unions and socialist politics, and also emphasizes the magazine's commitment to focusing on the humanity and fragility of Jesus, as opposed to his more divine representations in churches.

While Christological concerns are important to Art Young's image, Jesus' actions are also worth analyzing. By speaking at brotherhood hall on "the rights of labor" and styling himself "the workingman of Nazareth," Jesus emerges as a worker-leader of sorts. In fact, Young's accompanying article and later works explicitly claim that his Jesus was a "professional agitator," a term which requires some unpacking.<sup>32</sup> Agitator was a term used by both radicals and their opponents alike. For instance, the *New York Call* positively reviewed Bouck White's *Call of the Carpenter* because it painted him as a "true figure" and "agitator."<sup>33</sup> Likewise, early 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalists often labeled labor activists as radical or professional agitators, a term that often carried with it the implication that strikes began as the result of outside, even foreign, interference. For instance, in 1919 a steel mill

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<sup>31</sup> Art Young, "He Stirreth Up the People," *The Masses*, Vol. 5 No. 3 (December 1913): Cover Image.

<sup>32</sup> Art Young, *Art Young—His Life and His Times* (New York: Sheridan House, 1939), 294.

<sup>33</sup> Burns, *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus*, 94.

owner took out a full-page ad in *The Pittsburg Chronicle* to decry the “un-American teachings of *radical strike agitators*” (See figure 5).<sup>34</sup> The inference is clear: in portraying Jesus as an agitator, Young is looping him in with organized labor and its methods. Young’s Jesus is pro-strike, pro-worker, and pro-union. Jesus Christ the carpenter has become a union man.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to his cover image, Art Young also wrote an article called “One of Those Damned Agitators” to accompany his 1913 image. In it, Young specifically calls Jesus “the Nazareth carpenter” and “the great agitator of Palestine.”<sup>36</sup> We have already seen how the language of agitation casts Jesus in the same mold as labor activists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but Young escalates and makes more explicit his claim with this piece: “It is self-evident that had Jesus Christ, the great agitator of Palestine, been born in the last half of the nineteenth century, he would to-day be one of the many traveling speakers proclaiming the message of industrial democracy.”<sup>37</sup> In his brief article, Young does not trade in obtuse allusions or subtle hints; he is clear and explicit. For Young, it is “self-evident” that Jesus, were he alive today, would be not only a great ally of the cause of industrial labor, but one of its chief proponents and leaders. While he “lectur[ed] in the groves and byways of Palestine” in the first century, today Jesus would proclaim a new gospel—the gospel of labor.<sup>38</sup>

And just like anyone who preaches an authentic gospel, persecution inevitably follows this Jesus. Young posits, “[i]t is also self-evident that the authorities of these towns and cities would

<sup>34</sup> “The Strike Has Failed,” *The Pittsburg Chronicle*, October 6, 1919.

<sup>35</sup> It is also worth mentioning that Art Young’s image was reprinted in August 1921 in his journal *Good Morning*, which was published from 1919-1921. The image is not located in a 1917 issue of *The Masses* as many sources report. This time Jesus appears on a wanted poster, which offers a “reward for information leading” to his capture (Figure 3). The poster goes on to say that he is wanted for “sedition, criminal anarchy, vagrancy and conspiring to overthrow the established government. The result of Young’s second, reprinted poster is a Jesus who is linked inexorably to the cause of labor. He is a laborer himself, couched in the same language (“professional agitator”) and persecuted in the same way (by a legal system that claims legitimacy, but has proven itself to have none). Different socialist newspapers like *The Southern Worker* and *The Daily Worker*, as well as some religious publications reprinted the poster. In fact, it was so popular that it continues to be displayed by leftists even today, often with updated language. For example, Occupy London protesters updated the wanted poster to include references to Bradley Manning and Julian Assange, while casting Barack Obama and Queen Elizabeth II as Christ’s enemies (Figure 4).

<sup>36</sup> Art Young, “One of Those Damned Agitators,” *The Masses*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (December 1913): 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

consider him “Dangerous” or “Inciter to Riot,” “Accessory before the fact,” and an “Obstructor of traffic.”<sup>39</sup> Importantly, these are some of the same charges levied against strikers by authorities. For instance, IWW leaders Joseph J. Ettor and Arturo Giovanetti were charged with being an accessory before the fact of the murder of a striker during the 1912 Bread and Roses strike, even though they were miles away from the event and later acquitted.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the more violent Pullman Strike of 1894 resulted in accusations of “arson, murder, burglary, intimidation, assault, riot, and inciting to riot.”<sup>41</sup> Finally, in language similar to that used by Young, strikers in the Seattle General Strike of 1919 were called “ringleaders of anarchy.”<sup>42</sup> In charging this Jesus who preaches the gospel of “industrial democracy” with the same crimes that IWW strikers and activists were frequently charged with, Young is making an explicit link between Jesus and socialist labor actions.<sup>43</sup> This has the dual effect of sacralizing the IWW’s organized strike and bringing Jesus to the fore in one of the biggest political issues of the day. The IWW strikers receive halos, while Jesus grows an unruly beard. This Jesus preaches the same gospel as organizations like the IWW and, perhaps more importantly, suffers the same consequences as those organizations. He has become one of them, but there is one difference: “a sober second thought would tell them that the working class of this twentieth century *might* not stand for [the Jesus’ arrest and prosecution].”<sup>44</sup>

### **Jesus Christ, Union Man: Selected Poems**

Finally, having analyzed two of Art Young’s posters and one instance of his prose, we can turn our attention to some of *The Masses’* poetry. Two poems in *The Masses* explicitly depict Jesus as a common laborer and labor advocate. The first poem, “A Ballad,” by a poet known simply as “Williams,”

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Gerda Lerner, *“The” Female Experience: An American Documentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 421.

<sup>41</sup> Lindsey Almont, *The Pullman Strike: The Story of a Unique Experiment and of a Great Labor Uprising* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), 218.

<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1997), 128.

<sup>43</sup> Young, “One of Those Damned Agitators,” *The Masses*, (December 1913).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

focuses not on Jesus but on Joseph. “Williams” makes the case that Joseph, the “carpenter stiff” and Nazarene, is “the biggest man in creation.”<sup>45</sup> What makes Joseph so admirable is that, even though he knows that the child that Mary will deliver is not his, he is committed to raising it: “God knows what he told th’ neighbors/ But he knew it warn’t no Ghost/...An’ after the years had run,/ Folks tho’t no more o’ th’ gossip/ But called ‘im the Carpenter’s Son.”<sup>46</sup> Here, in emphasizing not just Jesus’ humanity but his position within society—illegitimate child, born to a poor family in a manger, and, most importantly for this paper, a carpenter’s son—“Williams” depicts Jesus as an ally to those at the bottom of the social pyramid. Within the context of *The Masses*, being an ally takes a very specific form—the support of unionization and the strike. In essence, “Williams” poem makes it clear that Jesus is *not* a boss; he is the illegitimate-but-nonetheless-claimed son of Joseph, the “carpenter stiff.”<sup>47</sup> He is one of the countless laborers who realizes that, in the words of Ralph Chaplin’s “Solidarity Forever,” “we can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old. For the union makes us strong.”<sup>48</sup>

The second of these poems, “Comrade Jesus” by Sarah Cleghorn, is much more direct in presenting Jesus as a laborer and union man.<sup>49</sup> Cleghorn’s poem again depicts Jesus as a professional agitator who is part of “mass-meetings in Palestine.”<sup>50</sup> Here Jesus stands up for the rights of the poor and destitute, identifying strongly with those parts of society that the poem’s Pharisees and Sadducees detest:

We knew whose side was spoken for  
When Comrade Jesus had the floor.

Where sore they toil and hard they lie,  
Among the great unwashed, dwell I:

<sup>45</sup> “Williams,” “A Ballad,” *The Masses*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (January 1916): 13.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Ralph Chaplin, “Solidarity Forever,” *Songs of the Workers To Fan the Flames of Discontent: The Little Red Songbook*, IWW Booklet, 2005, 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> The language of “comrade” can also be seen in John Richard Brown, *Jesus the Joyous Comrade*, (New York: Association Press, 1911).

<sup>50</sup> Sarah Cleghorn, “Comrade Jesus,” *The Masses*, Vol. 5, No. 7 (April 1914): 14.

The tramp, the convict I am he;  
Cold-shoulder him, cold-shoulder me.<sup>51</sup>

Cleghorn's depiction of Jesus as a tramp demands some unpacking. Perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively for present day readers, *The Masses'* leaders would have associated the tramp or hobo with unions. For instance, the IWW had hobos and tramps as members. As a result, one can say that Cleghorn is portraying Jesus as a laborer of sorts.<sup>52</sup> At the very least Jesus of Nazareth is eligible for union membership. Also worthy of note is the anti-Semitism in Cleghorn's "Comrade Jesus." Here Cleghorn makes Pharisees gross caricatures of greedy, oppressive capitalists, uniting nearly two thousand years of Christian anti-Judaism with anti-Semitism and socialist politics.

The message from the abovementioned lines is clear—it is not enough to be a laborer; one must be actively fighting for change through *action*, specifically the type of action embodied by the labor movement. Jesus is not only associated with tramps and convicts, but he advocates for them in "mass-meetings." In effect, the poem makes Jesus an ally of that oft-attacked tactic of early 20<sup>th</sup> century labor—the strike. But the poem's message goes further, and in its final lines makes clear that it is not only action that is endorsed but action within the proper community—the Industrial Workers of the World or "Wobblies":

Ah, let no local him refuse  
Comrade Jesus hath paid his dues  
Whatever other be debarred,  
Comrade Jesus has his *red card*.<sup>53</sup>

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (and today), all IWW members possessed a red card where they would mark their payment of dues through a stamp (Figure 6). When they had done so, they were welcome at all local chapters of the IWW. If Art Young made Jesus a union man, Sarah Cleghorn took it one

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> See: Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Frank Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Cleghorn, "Comrade Jesus," *The Masses*, (April 1914).

step further. Jesus has been transformed from a meek and mild carpenter to a class-conscious comrade who refused to be broken by capitalist powers. In a somewhat startling image, the cosmic ruler of the universe is a card-carrying member of the Industrial Workers of the World, and perhaps more importantly, all of his dues are paid. For Sarah Cleghorn and *The Masses*, Jesus is a Wobbly.

Whether in prose or art, the four examples discussed above accomplish similar goals. They downplay or fail to mention any divine qualities of Jesus, emphasize his humanity, highlight his lowly origins or status as laborer, and either implicitly or explicitly cast him as a union member or sympathizer. As such, these four examples represent an explicit deployment of Jesus’ status as *tehton* to make a point, arguing that trade unionism and Christianity are neither incompatible nor competing interests; they have the same goals. For if Christ were around today, *The Masses* posits that not only would he be a member of the carpenter’s union, he would be the union’s president. To the titles “prince of peace,” “king of kings and lord of lords,” and “light of the world,” *The Masses* would add one more—“Jesus Christ, *tehton* and union man.”

### **Wait, Where Did That Come From?: Anti-Semitism in Sarah Leghorn’s “Comrade Jesus”**

While the above discussion of Sarah Cleghorn’s “Comrade Jesus” has principally focused on her portrayal of Jesus, an in-depth analysis of her depiction of Jews is also warranted. In “Comrade Jesus,” a strict dichotomy is set up between the Pharisees, with Caiaphas at their head, and Jesus. Since “We knew whose side was spoken for/ When Comrade Jesus had the floor,” readers can also assume what side was spoken for when Jesus’ enemies, the Pharisees, had the floor.<sup>54</sup> For Cleghorn, the Pharisees speak for the rich, hegemonic powers of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine and the capitalists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, the poem goes further. Cleghorn’s Pharisees are petty slanderers who become indignant when Jesus threatens their power. Indeed, Jews do not appear at this “mass-meeting in Palestine” until Jesus condemns the rich, but then they become livid and kill him, masking their love of

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

power with holy talk:

By Dives' door, with thoughtful eye,  
He did tomorrow prophesy:  
"The Kingdom's gate is low and small:  
The rich can scarce wedge through at all."

"A dangerous man," said Caiaphas,  
"An ignorant demagogue alas.  
Friend of low women, it is he  
Slanders the Upright Pharisee."

For law and order, it was plain,  
For holy Church, he must be slain."<sup>55</sup>

But Cleghorn's Jesus refuses to soil his hands by violence, instead choosing to be free from the "childishness" of the Pharisees.<sup>56</sup> In Cleghorn's eyes, the Pharisees are nothing short of childish brutes, like the contemporary capitalists she abhorred. But from where does this portrayal come—is it merely the same sort of Christian anti-Judaism that one finds in patristic sources or Martin Luther, or is it something different? In my estimation, Cleghorn draws on the undeniably long history of Christian anti-Judaism in her "Comrade Jesus" by making use of the trope of self-righteous Pharisees more concerned with law and order than truth, but she also utilizes a particular brand of economic anti-Semitism common in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century socialist thought.

Of course, economic anti-Semitism has been around far longer than Karl Marx, but it finds a particularly intense and cogent manifestation in his *On the Jewish Question*, which uses economic anti-Semitism to argue somewhat counter-intuitively for the political emancipation of Jews in Germany. In *On the Jewish Question*, Marx contends that the essentialized Jew's true God is money, not YHWH: "What is the secular basis of Judaism? Practical need, self-interest. What is the worldly religion of the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly God? Money.”<sup>57</sup> Marx then follows this statement with the extremely anti-Semitic contention that “the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism.”<sup>58</sup>

Unfortunately, Marx’s legacy of anti-Semitism would be carried forward in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by leftists who projected the perceived problems of capitalist society onto Jews, a convenient and unfortunately popular target. Although writing specifically about German Marxists, Olaf Kistenmacher puts it best when he explains, “over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, the traditional anti-Jewish stigmatization was transformed from the ‘rich Jews’ to the modern conspiracy theory, in which ‘Jews’ not only were regarded as rich and powerful, but also personified the entire capitalist society.”<sup>59</sup> When contributors to *The Masses* like Sarah Cleghorn presented Jews as greedy capitalists intent on destroying a virtuous, socialist Jesus, they were not inventing the wheel anew; they were participating in a long legacy of Marxist critique and Christian anti-Judaism.

While *The Masses’* representation of Jesus represents a convergence of Christian anti-Judaism and Marxist anti-Semitism, it also sheds some light on one of the problems of radical historical Jesus scholarship. Often, in an effort to portray Jesus as a radical, scholars construct an image of an oppressive Judaism to use as a foil for Jesus’ liberative message. Amy-Jill Levine talks at length about this problem in her book *The Misunderstood Jew*. For Levine, the problem has never been using biblical texts to depict Jesus in a liberative manner, since “the biblical material has always been (and should continue to be) used to promote a more just society.”<sup>60</sup> The problem is that this approach can easily descend into anti-Semitic portrayals of “the Jews:”

If Jesus preaches good news to the poor, so the common impression goes, “the Jews” must be

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<sup>57</sup> Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” Ed. Andy Blunden, et al., 2010, 19.

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/On%20The%20Jewish%20Question.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Olaf Kistenmacher, “From ‘Judas’ to ‘Jewish Captial’: Antisemitic Forms of Thought in German Communist Party (KPD) in the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933,” *Engage Journal*, Issue 2, May 2006.

<sup>60</sup> Amy-jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: :HarperCollins, 2006), 9.



preaching good news to the rich. If Jesus welcomes sinners, “the Jews” must have pushed them away. If Jesus speaks to or heals women, “the Jews” must have set up a patriarchal society that makes the Taliban look progressive.<sup>61</sup>

And so Levine demonstrates that *The Masses*’ problematic representations of Judaism are not the sole purview of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxists—they unfortunately continue to be a major issue in progressive historical Jesus scholarship to this day. Good, liberative intentions can only take one so far. Over a century after *The Masses* first began publishing, the situation has not improved nearly as much as one would like. But the question remains: can one take *The Masses*’ image of a union-Jesus seriously? This is precisely the discussion I would like to turn to in the following pages.

### **But is There a Place for *The Masses*’ Jesus at the Inn?: Historical Jesus Debates**

One thing is certain: *The Masses* is not interested in obscuring its political aims. Due to the magazine’s directness, *The Masses*’ deployment of Jesus’ profession constitutes a unique insight into the political and theological stakes inherent in Jesus’ profession. For whether Jesus is a lowly carpenter, wandering hobo, or skilled artisan *matters*, and this fact does not escape *The Masses*’ contributors. The magazine constructs from Gospel sources a radical, socialist, Wobbly-Jesus precisely because their constituency and their social project demand it. Jesus appears in *The Masses* as a Wobbly because that is the Christological form that the magazine imagines for him. Of course, he was not a member of the Industrial Workers of the World in first century Palestine—that would be impossible. Rather, that is the form he would take in the present moment—the ideal *tekton* is, of course, a union man. A wealthy, skilled artisan is unimaginable in *The Masses*’ consciousness because such a Jesus would naturally ally himself, not with workers struggling to gain respect and rights, but with the bosses.

But how does one handle this explicit projection of *The Masses*’ desires and social location onto Jesus? Is it simply an intriguing historical artifact from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or does it have something to add to current historical Jesus scholarship? How one chooses to answer this question

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 9

gets to the very heart of the historical Jesus project’s goals. For if one believes that the purpose of historical Jesus scholarship is to objectively portray Jesus without projecting anything onto him, then *The Masses’* Jesus is at best ludicrous, and at worst a grotesque twisting of Jesus’ message for blatantly political aims.

In placing an emphasis on objectivity, one is joined by the likes of Albert Schweitzer, whose biting critique of 19<sup>th</sup> century Jesus scholarship rings true still today: “But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.”<sup>62</sup> More recently, John Dominic Crossan articulated a similar view, contending “it is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place...to do autobiography and call it biography.”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, in one of the most bizarre dialogues ever recorded in modern scholarship, Crossan contends “the historical Jesus is speaking to me” and that he, predictably, approves of Crossan’s *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*:

“I’ve read your book, Dominic, and it’s quite good. So now you’re ready to live by my vision and join me in my program?”

“I don’t think I have the courage, Jesus, but I did describe it quite well, didn’t I, and the method was especially good wasn’t it?”

“Thank you, Dominic, for not falsifying the message to suit your own incapacity. That at least is something.”<sup>64</sup>

For Crossan, it is possible to avoid “falsifying the message” of Jesus and to accurately depict the life of a man who lived two thousand years ago without bias, and, even more importantly, any depictions of

<sup>62</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Mineola, NY: Dover Books, 2005), 4.

<sup>63</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: the Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), xxviii.

<sup>64</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus a Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), XIV.

Jesus that depart from his own are biased.<sup>65</sup> Here, there is no room for *The Masses' Wobbly-Jesus* at the inn.

Thankfully, this is not the only way to conceive of the task of historical Jesus scholarship. From the start, this latest quest for the historical Jesus has posited multiple answers to Jesus question, “who do you say that I am.” For Crossan, “that stunning diversity is an academic *embarrassment*.”<sup>66</sup> But for others, most notably Kwok Pui-lan, the opposite is true; the multiplicity of opinions about Jesus is a great asset, not a liability, and certainly not an embarrassment. For Pui-lan, “there is no original or privileged understanding of Christ...that can be claimed as pure and foundational, not subject to the limitations of culture and history. It is a futile exercise to search for the ‘real’ or historical Jesus.”<sup>67</sup> For all Crossan and the Jesus seminar’s impressive talk, there is no pristine, untouched Jesus to get back to; what we have is interpretation, not fact. Quoting George Soares-Prabhu, a biblical scholar from India, Pui-lan asserts that the multiplicity of Jesus’ representations is only natural, since “every community evolves its own understanding of Jesus responding to its own cry for life.”<sup>68</sup> As a result, she suggests using “can you guess how many different names Jesus has in the world?” as a starting point for thinking about Jesus.<sup>69</sup> Where the Jesus Seminar used colored balls to indicate statements about Jesus they thought were true, Pui-lan advocates a different kind of approach, one that brings “decentered, diasporic, Third world, Jewish, black, gay and lesbian, immigrant, [and] brown-skinned women’s perspectives” into the conversation.<sup>70</sup> For Pui-lan, *The Masses' Wobbly-Jesus* takes its place between Corn Mother and Shakti-Jesus as an authentic depiction, and the quest for a positivistic or “real” historical Jesus is, in effect, done away with.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xxviii-xxix: “the plurality is enough to underline the problem...it seems we have as many pictures as we have exegetes.”

<sup>67</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 182.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>69</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, “On Color-Coding Jesus: An Interview with Kwok Pui-lan,” in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 187.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 186

If one adopts Pui-lan’s model, as I am advocating, then the quest for the historical Jesus is over. Here Pui-lan and Michael Bird, two scholars who disagree on many accounts, come together; they both agree on the theologization of the quest for the historical Jesus. For, as Michael Bird puts it, “the historical Jesus is not the ‘real’ Jesus. The search is for the reconstruction of Jesus...the picture of Jesus that emerges from the application of historical tools.”<sup>71</sup> If scholars are no longer chasing after a “real” Jesus, then the type of historical Jesus research that seems most appropriate is overtly theological: “historical Jesus study is a form of narrative theology whereby the Jesus story is explored in relation to the Christian belief-mosaic that it generated.”<sup>72</sup> After all, whether scholars explicitly admit it or not, “the history of Jesus emits far-reaching theological significance,” and it seems both unwise and deceptive to ignore how historical Jesus scholarship impacts and is shaped by theology.<sup>73</sup> In essence, I am calling for historical Jesus scholarship to be honest about both the type of theological and social impact it is trying to create, and the ways that it continues to be shaped by scholars’ social location and theological presuppositions. This would require figures like Crossan to drop the pretense of objectivity and embrace that *his* Jesus is a peasant-cynic precisely because this is the Jesus that speaks to his theological and social location and the type of world, both theologically and socially, he is attempting to create. *The Masses’* Jesus represents just the type of scholarship that I am advocating for; it is honest about the type of Jesus it is depicting and *why* it is doing so.

But where does that leave those interested in Jesus the person—are they to simply accept every model for the historical Jesus that gets proposed on the grounds that all are equally valid? Bird puts the perceived problem with pluriformity like this: “texts can be used to sculpt a masterpiece or create a monster, and there is no longer any critical basis to call one a beauty and the other an abomination since such readings are self-authenticating and there is no authorial-textual magistrate to render

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<sup>71</sup> Michel Bird, “The Peril of Modernizing Jesus and the Crisis of Not Contemporizing Christ,” EQ 78.4, (2006): 306.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

judgment.”<sup>74</sup> To put it bluntly, this objection is overplayed. While embracing multiplicity may leave scholars without the false security of objectivity, I do think that there are two criteria one can use to discern which models for Jesus are at least relatively better than others. The first is historical feasibility—how likely is it that this model represents historical reality? The second is functional significance—what does this model for Jesus *do*? What communities does it impact, and how? More specifically, I draw on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* when formulating this second criterion. In this work, Fiorenza reformulates Patricia Hill Collins’ framework for analyzing social theory into three epistemological questions that “must be asked” when considering historical Jesus scholarship.<sup>75</sup> One of these questions serves as the second criterion’s driving force: “does this social theory equip people to resist oppression, and is it functional as a tool of social transformation?”<sup>76</sup>

For instance, while it might be low-hanging fruit, one can use these two criteria to reject the Aryan Jesus proposed by Nazi theologians. The Aryan Jesus fails on both counts: it is not historically plausible that Jesus was the descendant of a Viking clan, and, more importantly, the Aryan Jesus is the theological weapon of anti-Semitism in its most overt form—its goal is violence and destruction. But it is more interesting to apply these two criteria to another claim about the historical Jesus that centers on his profession and social class, but comes to a different conclusion than *The Masses*—American prosperity gospel theology. Prosperity gospel theologians claim that Jesus was “constantly in a state of wealth,” and they simultaneously posit what that means for their followers: “God wants his [sic] followers to be rich.”<sup>77</sup> Surely one can say that this model for Jesus is neither historically plausible (Jesus certainly does not seem to be wealthy), nor does it have the social impact that one wishes to see

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2000), 25.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> John Blake, “Passions Over ‘Prosperity Gospel’: Was Jesus Wealthy?” December 25, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/LIVING/wayoflife/12/25/RichJesus/index.html>

in the world. It merely reinforces capitalist hegemony and subjugates the poor by telling them that Jesus could have never been one of them, since “the rich will never follow the poor.”<sup>78</sup> By contrast, *The Masses’* Jesus fares well on both counts. The magazine consistently portrays Jesus as a “workingman,” tramp, or carpenter, which is in line with the historical resources at our disposal, and uses Jesus’ profession to “equip people to resist oppression” and transform the world.<sup>79</sup> Where it begins to get in trouble, however, is in recapitulating anti-Semitic images of Pharisees and Sadducees. While on the whole *The Masses* does a good job of making their Jesus a “tool of social transformation,” here they come up short.

In the end, *The Masses’* use of Jesus’ profession to rally support for their socialist politics is an honest endeavor—*The Masses* is uninterested in claiming objectivity. As such, *The Masses’* depiction of Jesus as “workingman” and Wobbly demonstrates in a vivid, exciting way the political and theological impact of historical Jesus scholarship. But *The Masses’* portrayal of Jesus can also serve as both a challenge to contemporary Jesus scholarship and a touchstone for creating new standards for what constitutes “good” historical Jesus scholarship. Drawing on the work of Pui-lan and Bird, I have suggested that there is no “real” Jesus to be found in scholarship. Instead, scholars have only models for Jesus, some of which are better than others. It is my contention that one should take *The Masses’* portrayal of Jesus as seriously as one might take Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson, or Holland Lee Hendrix’s representations of Jesus and his profession. In fact, one *must* do so, for *The Masses’* Jesus constitutes the epitome of “good” historical Jesus scholarship—it is liberative, honest, and historically grounded. But taking *The Masses’* Jesus seriously also means turning a critical eye towards it, and while there is much good in *The Masses’* portrayal of Jesus, in some of the texts there is a convergence of socialist politics, anti-Semitism, radical historical Jesus scholarship, and Christian anti-Judaism. This cannot be swept under the proverbial rug, and, if one applies the criterion of functional

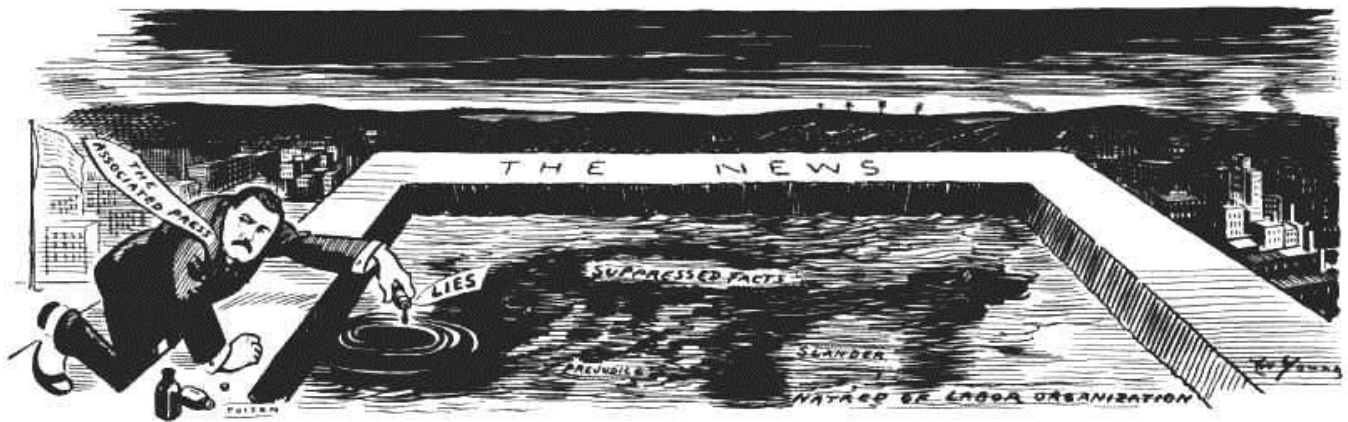
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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, 25.

significance to this specific instance, *The Masses* would certainly fail. But, on the whole, *The Masses'* Jesus does not fail that criterion—it uses historically grounded scholarship about Jesus to equip the proletariat to do battle with Mammon. Moreover, as this paper has discussed, one would be hard pressed to find liberative historical Jesus scholarship that is perfect. The point here is that those interested in the historical Jesus should take the liberation of *The Masses'* Jesus, while also critiquing its faults. If we are willing to do so, then we might find that, almost a century later, the Wobbly-Jesus leads us forward.

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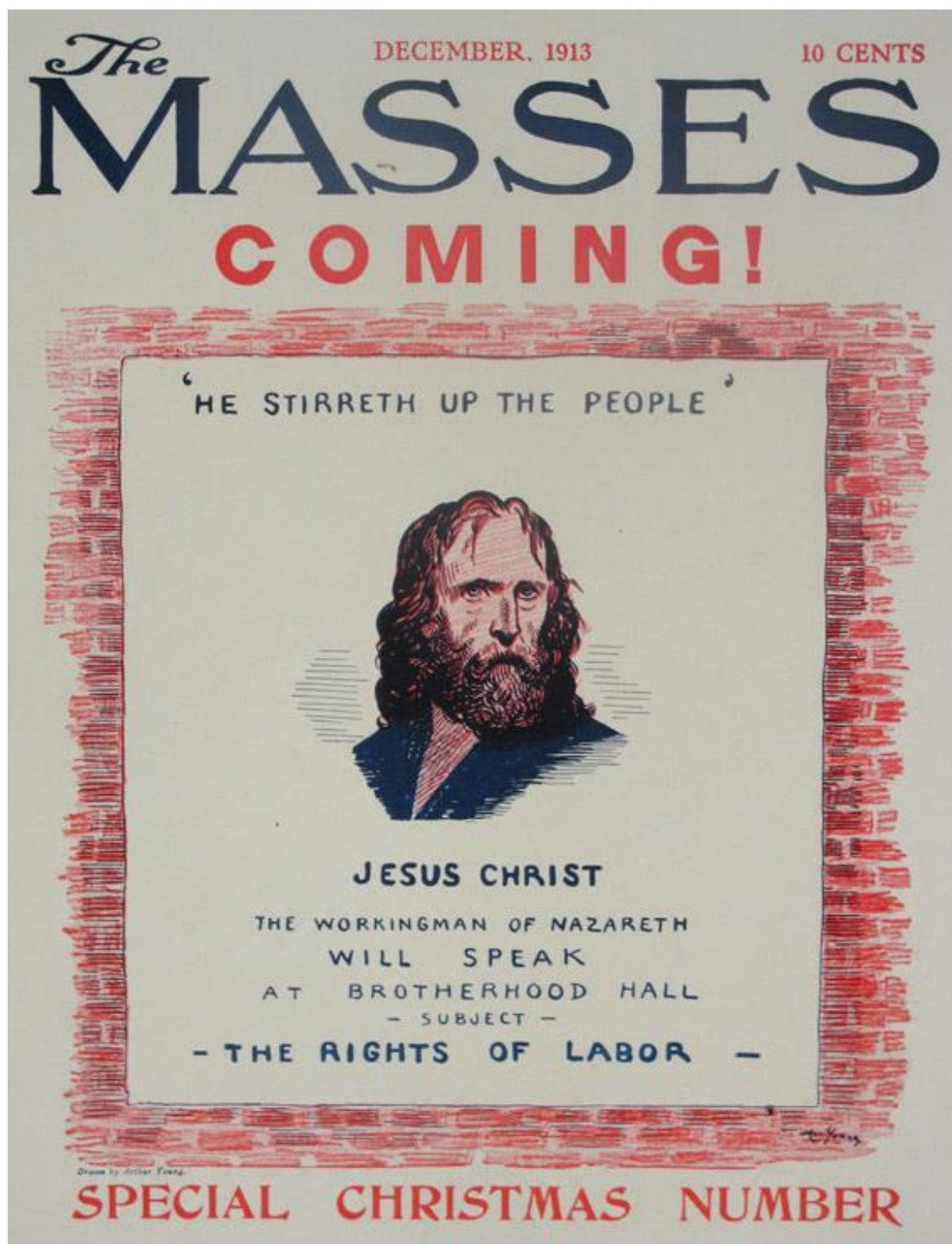


Poisoned at the Source

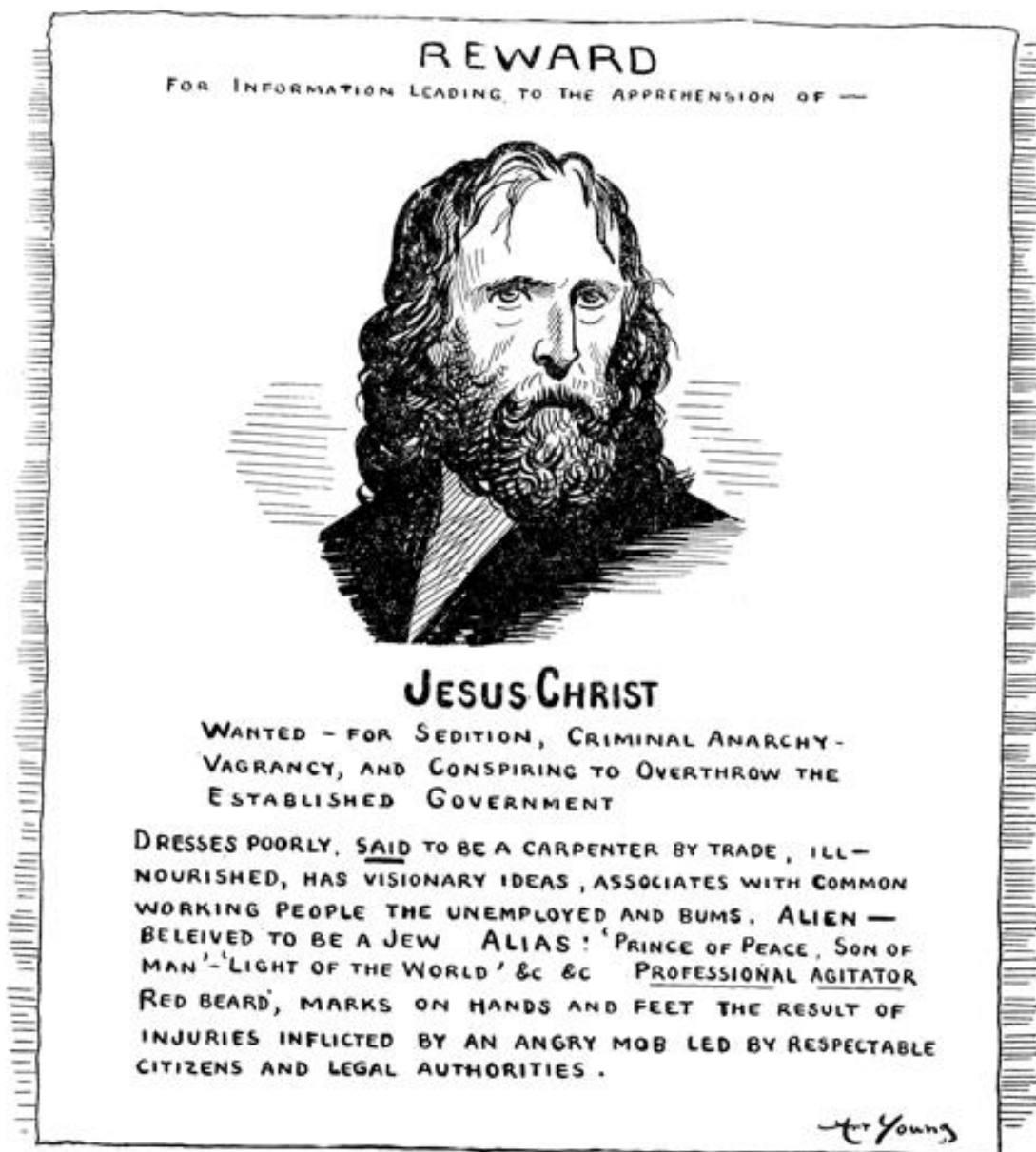
Figure 1<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Art Young, "Poisoned at the Source," *The Masses*, July 1913.



Figure 1<sup>2</sup>

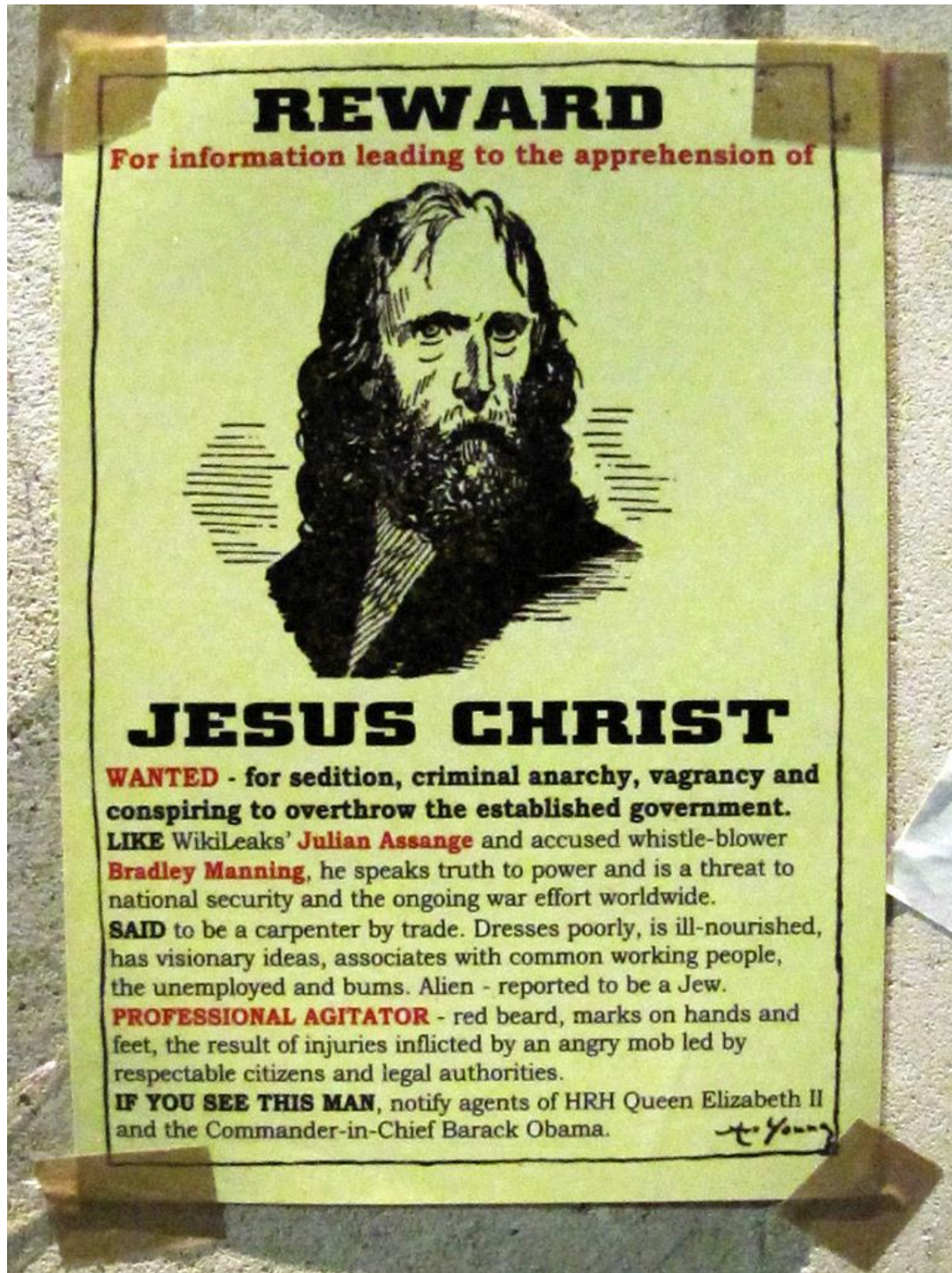
<sup>2</sup> Art Young, "He Stirreth Up the People." *The Masses*, December 1913, Cover Image.



## Arrest This Man

Figure 2<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Art Young "Reward for Information Leading to the Apprehension of." *Good Morning*, Vol. 3, No. 10, August 1921.

Figure 3<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Duncan C., "Reward for Information Leading to the Apprehension of Jesus Christ," Dec. 6, 2011.  
[www.flickr.com/photos/duncan/6468224547/in/photostream/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/duncan/6468224547/in/photostream/)





Figure 5<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>“Membership Card of the Mining Department of the IWW,” 1907 Image.  
<http://www.workerseducation.org/crutch/graphics/const/wfmcardin.jpg>

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