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Chapter 17: Socialism/Political Radicalism

Anarchism/Industrial Workers of the World

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), popularly called the “Wobblies,” is an international industrial union, founded in 1905 in opposition to the policies of the conservative trade union-based American Federation of Labor (AFL). From its earliest days, the IWW advocated the abolishment of the wage system, and although the IWW was never explicitly anarchist, many of its members and leaders were influenced by anarcho-syndicalism, which encourages direct action on the part of workers to control industry and thereby take control of the capitalist state, running it in the best interests of the majority. Although at its peak in 1923 the IWW could claim 100,000 members in good standing, the IWW declined rapidly during the 1920s due to government repression and the attractiveness of Bolshevism to its membership, by 1930, only 10,000 members remained. Although the IWW is popularly remembered for anarchism, they were influential in establishing a shop system of self-management popularly called the “Wobbly Shop” and in pioneering many nonviolent direct action activities that would be adopted by later unions such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), as well as the civil rights movement. Among these nonviolent tactics were sit-down strikes, boycotts, and general strikes. The IWW also has established a significant presence in Australia, Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

#### **[A] Founding and Early Years**

The Industrial Workers of the World was officially founded on June 27, 1905, in Chicago, Illinois, at a hastily organized meeting of radical industrial unionists that IWW

founding member William “Big Bill” Haywood called “The Continental Congress of the Working Class.” Among those in attendance at the meeting included Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, socialist leaders Daniel DeLeon and Eugene V. Debs, anarchist Lucy Parsons and “labor priest” Thomas J. Hagerty. The meeting was called to establish a network of industrial unions, that is, unions that served all workers within one industry as opposed to the AFL’s trade unions that served only workers within specific trades. To this end, the IWW took the motto “One Big Union,” reflecting the organizers’ belief that a large union that accommodated all workers would better serve labor interests than weaker, easily divided trade unions. The IWW’s founders came from many different traditions; some like Haywood and Hagerty came from radical western unions such as the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) that were forged in the fires of the Colorado Labor Wars. Others, like DeLeon saw the IWW as a means of creating a significant socialist workers’ party in the United States. Still others were trade unionists disgruntled by the conservatism of AFL leader Samuel Gompers. Despite the presence of Parsons at the founding meeting, the IWW was not organized initially under any anarchist principles.

The IWW gained national attention the following year in Goldfield, Nevada when local affiliates of the IWW and the WFM merged and attempted to expand to include skilled workers in their ranks. This was bitterly resisted by members of local AFL unions, culminating in conflicts between the AFL and mine owners and the IWW. In December 1907, Nevada Governor John Sparks appealed to President Theodore Roosevelt for federal aid, and Roosevelt promptly sent 300 federal troops to expel the IWW from Goldfield. The conflict in Goldfield, coupled with factional differences between syndicalists and socialists within the IWW eventually led to the WFM leaving the IWW.

The WFM would rejoin the AFL in 1911.

The conflict that drove the Western Federation of Miners from the Industrial Workers of the World in 1908 was part of a struggle over the direction of the IWW. Socialists like Daniel DeLeon argued that the IWW should act as a union auxiliary of DeLeon's Socialist Labor Party, with the main goal of advancing workers' interests through political action the election of Socialist candidates for local and state office while Haywood and his allies, Hagerty and Vincent St. John, had become convinced of the merits of syndicalism. They insisted that direct action through strikes, labor agitation and organization of the working class was the best way to transform capitalist society into a system where workers would run industry and government. The IWW rank-and-file, deeply suspicious of political action, supported Haywood in large numbers. DeLeon and his supporters left the IWW to form a rival union, the Workers' International Industrial Union which adhered more closely to DeLeon's vision.

The IWW continued to grow into the 1910s thanks in part to the inclusion of immigrants, women, and African-Americans within their ranks. They had notable successes in strikes at the Pressed Steel Car Company in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania in 1909, which brought together immigrant workers from 15 different countries, and a 1913 strike of longshoremen in Philadelphia led by African-American IWW member Ben Fletcher, uniting African-American, eastern European and Irish-American dockworkers in a common cause.

Perhaps the IWW's most famous success was the "Bread and Roses" strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts's textile mills (1912). Following an attempt by mill owners to reduce wages for their largely immigrant female workforce by thirty-two cents an hour in

early January 1912, IWW organizers Joseph Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti led a strike for a fifteen percent wage increase and extra overtime pay that would bring textile production in the city to a standstill. The strikers took to the streets in a moving picket line, carrying signs that read: “We want bread, but we want roses too!”--a plea for better wages and improved working conditions. Martial law was declared, dozens of arrests of strikers and IWW leaders were made, and Ettor and Giovannitti were jailed for the shooting death of striker Anna LoPizzo, despite the fact that both men were five miles away at the time of LoPizzo’s murder. Public support, initially on the side of the textile companies, switched over to that of the strikers in February, following a dramatic clash between police and striking workers attempting to send their children to New York City for relief. The national press corps extensively covered the event and photos of police clubbing women and children led to public outrage and Congressional hearings. Finally on March 12, two months after the strike began, the textile companies gave in to all of the strikers’ demands. Following international protests and threat of further strikes, Ettor and Giovannitti were eventually acquitted of the murder of LoPizzo in November 1912. Despite this success and others, the IWW could not maintain a foothold in many places it organized, disdaining collective bargaining agreements in favor of constant struggle against employers. This was unacceptable to workers happy with gains from a successful strike.

### **[A] Government Repression and Decline**

Given the extraordinary scope of the IWW’s activities and their often-revolutionary rhetoric, it is little surprise that they would become targets for government action. As early as 1909, IWW organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was jailed in Spokane,

Washington for violating an ordinance that prohibited street meetings. In the disorder that followed, over 500 people went to jail and four people were killed. In California, anti-IWW vigilantes (tacitly supported by police and local government) attacked IWW organizing meetings, notably sparking the Wheatland Hop Riot, when police and agricultural workers clashed at the Durst Ranch in Wheatland, California on August 3, 1913. Four people, including the local district attorney died in the riot.

In 1914, IWW activist and songwriter Joe Hill was arrested for the murder of butcher (and former policeman) John Morrison and his son in Park City, Utah. Despite circumstantial evidence and a worldwide appeal for clemency, Hill was found guilty and executed by firing squad on November 19, 1915. Orrin Hilton, Hill's lawyer declared that "the main thing the state had on Hill was that he was an IWW and therefore sure to be guilty."

The clashes between all levels of government and the IWW generally turned the public against the union. As Melvyn Dubofsky writes in *We Shall Be All*, a history of the IWW, "the hobo Wobbly had replaced the bearded, bomb-throwing anarchist as a bogeyman in the middle-class American's fevered imagination." The IWW was further hurt by the climate of antiradicalism during World War I. Most IWW members opposed the United States' involvement in the war, reflecting the organization's founding principle that war was a capitalist struggle against the best interests of the workers. After the United States declared war against Germany in April 1917, the IWW released a statement denouncing war, and advised its members to claim draft exemption based on their opposition to the war.

This action turned much of the public against the IWW. IWW leader Frank Little

vocally opposed to the war was lynched in Butte, Montana in August 1917 while he was organizing a strike at the Anaconda Mining Company. The following month, the Department of Justice raided 48 IWW meeting halls and arrested 165 IWW leaders. In total 101 were charged and convicted for obstructing the draft, including Big Bill Haywood, who before sentencing fled to the Soviet Union, where the Bolshevik Revolution had installed a communist government.

The year 1919 witnessed increased violence toward the IWW. On November 11, 1919, the American Legion in Centralia, Washington attacked the local IWW union hall, resulting in a firefight between Legion members and the IWW. Four people died, two of whom were killed by IWW member and World War I veteran Wesley Everest. Everest was arrested and that night taken from his cell and lynched three times, castrated and shot. The county coroner declared his death a suicide and no one was ever arrested for his murder. In December 1919, the IWW became a target of the Palmer Raids, a round-up of suspected radicals ordered by U.S. attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer. Nearly 3,000 foreign-born members of the IWW were arrested in nighttime raids by the Department of Justice and saved from deportation only by Assistant Secretary of Labor Louis F. Post's insistence that IWW membership alone was not grounds for deportation. Additionally, Joe Hill's ashes were confiscated during the raids, and would not be returned to the IWW until 1988 under the Freedom of Information Act.

The IWW entered the 1920s badly bruised, but not beaten. Despite most of its leadership in prison or exile, the IWW still claimed 100,000 members in good standing as late as 1923. However, without a strong leader like Haywood to manage the factions within the IWW, it began to split. The Communist Party, using the success of the

Bolshevik Revolution in Russia as a model, pushed to incorporate the IWW into its ranks. Although the IWW leadership resisted the Communist Party's overtures, many members did indeed abandon the IWW. More disturbingly, it laid the groundwork for a larger division in 1924 that would spell the end of the IWW's organizational effectiveness.

In late 1923, a conflict erupted between the Eastern and Western branches of the IWW. Ostensibly over the issue of asking for pardons for the IWW leaders convicted in 1918, the dispute grew into a larger conflict over the future of the union. The Western forces, strongly anti-Bolshevik, anti-clemency, and strongly anarcho-syndicalist in orientation preferred a decentralized structure to the IWW while the Eastern faction was more sympathetic to Communism and pro-clemency, and disdained the anarchist principles that characterized the Western faction. The Eastern leaders preferred a more manageable, top-down "centralized" union. Personal problems between the leaders of the two factions exacerbated the feud, which finally split the union for good at their annual convention in 1924 with the Western faction gaining control of the IWW.

Following the split at the 1924 convention, the IWW went into a rapid decline. Disillusioned IWW members drifted to the right and left, leaving the union in droves. The appearance of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the mid-1930s finally supplanted the IWW, because the CIO succeeded where the IWW did not by achieving a lasting presence among the workers of the most important industries in the United States.

#### **[A] The IWW Today and its Legacy**

Despite its precipitous decline in the early decades of the twentieth century, the IWW still exists today, and continues to organize unionization drives and support worker-rights issues through direct action. The wave of radicalism in the 1960s brought a

new generation of people into the IWW, and briefly led to a revival. The University Cellar, a campus bookstore run by University of Michigan students in the 1960s was for several years the largest “Wobbly shop” in the United States, and several small publishing houses that opened during the 1960s and 1970s were IWW shops. More recently, the IWW has organized union drives at Borders Books, Starbucks, among sex workers in Berkeley, California, and in small businesses in New York, Chicago, Seattle, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and the Bay Area of California. In 2001 they helped organize a boycott of the Coca-Cola Company over allegations that Coca-Cola had allegedly funded a paramilitary security force to suppress workers’ rights in Colombia. As of 2006 the IWW had over 2,000 members (of whom 900 are in good standing). Their current headquarters are in Cincinnati, Ohio.

As Melvyn Dubofsky has noted, since World War I the popular image of the “Wobblies” became one of violent “Bolshevik desperadoes.” However, this view obscures the IWW’s influence both in its own time and the years since. Their successful use of nonviolent direct action, the organization of industrial unions, and inclusive membership policies were adopted by the more moderate Congress of Industrial Organizations; their calls for social justice would gain renewed importance in the Civil Rights Era. The first “Wobbly martyr” Joe Hill became a folk hero immortalized in song by artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez.

Ultimately, the IWW’s greatest failure was in overestimating the average worker’s desire for change. The IWW’s syndicalism was too radical for the majority of American workers. They were not interested in revolution, nor did they want to control the means of production to transform capitalist society. They simply wanted their lives

improved. Despite these failures, the IWW had notable success in doing just that; they introduced elements of grassroots democracy and social justice into the work place, and they remain a great influence on the development of the labor movement not only within the United States, but around the world as well.

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*See also* DECLINE OF U.S. SOCIALISM; INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM IN THE UNITED STATES; LABOR IN THE EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY; LABOR MOVEMENT AND MINORITY WORKERS; POLITICAL SOCIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES; RED SCARE DEPORTATIONS; UNITED AUTO WORKERS SIT-DOWN STRIKES

### **Further Reading**

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