

1905-today: The Industrial Workers of the World in the US



A short history of the US branch of the most revolutionary mass organisation in American history, the Industrial Workers of the World union, the IWW.

The IWW changed American trade unionism forever, being the first big union to organise black and white across entire industries, and calling for the abolition of the wage system and industrial democracy. It was largely defeated by a massive campaign of repression launched by bosses and the government

A 'Wobbly' Century

In late 18th century America, European immigrants with anarchist ideas combined with strong anti-statist traditions of US workers to create a burgeoning anarchist current. By the 1880's, anarchist influenced ideas dominated the emerging US revolutionary movement, with anarchist groups developing across North America, producing a diverse range of papers and magazines in a myriad of different languages.

It was no accident that anarchists in Chicago were at the centre of a movement that looked to the unions as a means of bringing about an anarchist society. They had been active in the workplace for many years, and had taken a prominent role in the struggle for the 8-hour day that led to the fateful demonstration on May 1st in 1886, after which eight anarchists - [the Haymarket Martyrs](#) - were framed and condemned to death.

Anarcho-syndicalist ideas also developed in numerous anarchist groups especially in Paterson, New Jersey where Italian and [Spanish anarchists](#) were active. They published numerous articles reporting the development of European revolutionary syndicalism, and created a silk workers' union which was to later join the IWW. They were also important in helping to spread anarcho-syndicalism amongst western mine workers who were to play such an important part in future developments.

In the manifesto from the meeting in January 1905 that led to the creation of the IWW, the basic principles of anarcho-syndicalism were clearly evident. The main author, Thomas J Hagerly, was influenced by European anarcho-syndicalist ideas.

Political parties

The original manifesto saw no role for political parties, arguing that workers should organise industrially to “take and hold that which is produced through an economic organisation of the working class”. On the basis of the January Manifesto, a convention was organised on the 27th June 1905, again in Chicago.



Early IWW poster.

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The Western Federation of Miners (WFM), led by “Big” Bill Hayward, who chaired the convention, provided the largest presence. The WFM was a radical western industrial union that had in recent years fought a number of bitter disputes with owners who had engaged private armies against workers. There were also in attendance delegates from socialist organisations, including the two main US socialist parties (and bitter rivals), the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and the Socialist Party of America (SPA).

The convention produced a preamble that sought to link the immediate struggle to the wider aim of overthrowing capitalism. The main tactic was unambiguous; the newly formed IWW was to set about organising workers into “One Big Union”, whose aim was revolution, after which the union would take over the running of society in the newly established co-operative commonwealth. In the build-up to the revolution, the IWW would wage class war against the capitalist class, developing workers’ revolutionary consciousness in the process.

From the outset, the new union condemned racism. The convention declared that any wage earner could be a member regardless of occupation, race, creed or sex. Anti-discrimination and internationalism quickly became part of its culture and two of its major strengths. Racism especially was recognised as a major factor used by capitalism to divide the working class, affecting both black Americans and newly arrived South East Asians and Europeans. The American Federation of Labor (AFOFL) was openly racist - for example, it produced stickers drawing consumers’ attention to those goods that had been produced by white workers.

From the IWW’s earliest days, a source of controversy was its stance on political parties. The clause excluding a role for parties in the workers’ struggle had been dropped from the January Manifesto on the insistence of Daniel de Leon, the SLP leader. De Leon, a recent convert to industrial unionism, was much admired by Lenin, who was later to develop the idea of using workers’ economic power to win himself state power in Russia. After much debate, a compromise was reached under which the general strike was included in the constitution as well as a role for political action.

Turning point

At the 1908 IWW convention, a Chicago motion was passed which removed all reference to political activity from the constitution. In response, the SLP delegates formed a rival IWW based in Detroit, which had little impact. This proved to be a turning point. Detached from the SLP, the IWW developed its core revolutionary policies over the next few years. The strategy that emerged stated that in building “One Big Union”, the IWW would seek to “form the new society inside the shell of the old”. In time, the point would be reached where the workers’ organisation would be powerful enough to use the general strike, take over the means of production, and abolish the wage system. In a nutshell, this would lead to the establishment of industrial democracy, in a workers’ commonwealth.



IWW members on strike

The voting strength that had enabled the organisation to escape the influence of the SLP had come mainly from the west coast groups. Over the next few years, it was this vibrant part of

the IWW which would create the culture of struggle that formed the central essence of the organisation. Often politicised by anarchism, they despised both capitalism and the state. They also had a deep mistrust of politicians and leaders in general, extending to the IWW leadership. Eastern-based radicals did not look too favourably on the western workers. Dismissed by the likes of de Leon as the “Overalls Brigade”, criticism was not confined to the socialist intelligentsia. Some East Coast anarchists also berated them as “this bunch of pork-chop philosophers, agitators who have no real, great organising ability or creative brain power”.

To organise unskilled workers in the west was no easy task. The western US was far less industrialised than the east. The workers were largely migrant and so had no permanent workplace through which they could be physically organised. As an alternative, western workers made the “mixed local” the basis of their organisation. Centred on the union hall, the mixed local was a geographically based organisation, which included both the employed and unemployed. This contrasted with the workplace-based locals in much of the eastern IWW.

The union hall began to evolve as the centre of working class organisational life, and developed into the local intellectual and cultural centre. Here was to be found the basis of an alternative working class culture centred on the idea of solidarity and struggle. Combining art and politics, the western IWW groups produced plays, poems, songs and cartoons. In meaningful, emotional and personal expressions, Wobblies (as IWW members became known) sought to analyse the world from a working class perspective and create a rich culture of both unity and diversity.

Free speech

From this culture of solidarity and self-respect emerged the famous free speech campaign which propelled the IWW to prominence before the First World War. It grew out of the struggle against employment agencies which operated in gateway towns for the mining, lumber, and agricultural industries in the west. The IWW called for a boycott of the agencies and for workers to be recruited via union halls - similar to the recently successful [syndicalist union CGT](#) campaign in France. “Soapbox orators”, the most common form of IWW agitation, set up outside employment agencies to denounce their corrupt practices. The police responded by prohibiting street speaking.

From 1908 to 1916, the free speech campaign became the focus of a bitter battle between the IWW and the US state, during which some 5,000 IWW members were imprisoned. The prisons rapidly filled, forcing the state to back down. In the process of winning the campaign, the IWW also exposed the brutality of the US prison system.

The emphasis on community, culture and free speech did not stop the IWW from taking on the capitalists in the workplace. After a difficult few years, by 1910 the IWW had recovered some of its early strength, organising many strikes. Perhaps the most prominent strike was in Goldfield, Nevada, where the IWW attempted to organise all of the 30,000 population. They won an 8-hour day and a minimum wage of \$4.50, before being brutally repressed by the state militia. By 1912, the IWW was strong enough to embark on what became two of the most famous strikes at Lawrence and Paterson.

In Lawrence, a Massachusetts textile town, 30,000 immigrant workers toiled in appalling conditions. Organising was particularly difficult as workers were from over a dozen countries, and spoke many different languages. The Lawrence strike took on an insurrectionary nature from the outset. The IWW made no attempt to play down its

revolutionary ideas; on the contrary, they sought to raise revolutionary consciousness among workers. The state brought in 1,500 militia, backed up by the police.

Shock waves

During the bitter dispute, these forces used guns, clubs and bayonets to try and force workers back to work, resulting in a number of deaths. Hundreds were arrested, some on false murder charges. Despite this, the IWW organised a tremendous victory, with a pay rise for unskilled workers of 25%. As a result, the American Woollen Federation was also forced to increase wages by 8% across 32 cities. The strike sent shock waves across America and acted as a rallying cry for the unorganised.

Paterson was next, in 1913. As already noted, this silk weaving centre near New York had a strong anarchist tradition. The IWW sought standardised, improved wages and conditions for 25,000 workers. However, after months of ruthless militia activity, with several workers killed and hundreds imprisoned, the strike ended in failure. This was a bitter blow despite the consolation that events in both Lawrence and Paterson had ensured that the IWW was now seen as the formidable organisation.

The IWW's growth was not just confined to the US. Powerful IWW unions now existed in [Australia](#) and Chile, and IWW-influenced unions like the [Industrial Workers of Africa](#) and many smaller syndicalist outreach groups sprung up across the globe.

Behind the IWW's growth and success, however, was a rising controversy over internal democracy. Western locals were concerned that the IWW was too centralised. At the 1911 convention, western delegates had attempted to pass resolutions to limit the power of the General Executive Board (GEB) and devolve it to the regions. Though defeated, the resolutions reflected a growing rift between the eastern and western wings of the organisation.

At the following convention centralisation again reared its head. This time eastern sections argued for the free speech campaign to be brought under GEB control. This outraged the western delegation, reinforcing fears of centralisation.

The 1913 IWW convention is often portrayed as a conflict between anarchist de-centralisers on the west coast and the more socialist centralisers of the east coast. This is too simplistic. The division between east and west in many ways reflected two different cultures based on different conditions. To the eastern IWW, workplace organisation was far more important. The west was far less industrialised, with a large migrant workforce who campaigned on a wide range of issues.

Undoubtedly, anarcho-syndicalism was, and remains, anti-centralisation, so it is not surprising that many found the IWW over-centralised. That is not to say that anarcho-syndicalists would have backed many of the one hundred motions put forward by western delegates. If passed, these would have reduced the IWW to a loose-knit confederation of autonomous groups, with the attendant difficulties of maintaining cohesion.

In the event, the 1913 convention ended in defeat for the western delegation. Not only did their motions fall, but their fear of centralisation was justified by the passing of a motion bringing all publications under the supervision of the GEB. Worst of all, the acrimonious debate left the whole organisation deeply divided.



Cartoon from the New York Globe during World War I, trying to portray anti-war Wobblies as linked to the German Kaiser

The outbreak of World War I led to increased economic activity and a shortage of labour. The IWW took advantage to win concessions and recruit workers, and entered its heyday period. By 1917, membership was 150,000, with large sections and unions in the metal, mining, railway, forestry, agriculture and marine transport industries. From this point on, its success and revolutionary politics combined to bring it into ever-increasing direct conflict with the state.

State repression

From the start, the IWW voiced its total opposition to the war. Hayward declared it was better to be a traitor to your country than a traitor to your class. The IWW continued to organise strike action wherever possible. The state response was a wave of repression.

In September 1917, the state authorities raided all the national, regional and local offices of the IWW. They seized everything they could lay their hands on and arrested every IWW member they could find. Thousands of members, along with other anarchists and socialists, were harassed, arrested, imprisoned and deported as the state attempted to destroy the IWW. The intense, sustained tide of repression continued for the remainder of the war and after. As well as direct state terror, the IWW was also subject to violence from state-backed vigilantes. Being a wobbly during the war was to risk beating, shooting or lynching – [Frank Everett](#) was a victim of one such attack. Legendary union songwriter and Wobbly [Joe Hill](#) was framed for murder, and executed. In a cynical move, the state also enrolled the support of reformist unions. Federal labour laws introduced state mediation, the right to collective

bargaining for AFofL affiliates; minimum pay and the basic 8-hour day. The reformist unions were quick to respond to the state attempt to win them over to the war effort.

In 1919, 23 states introduced criminal syndicalist laws. Overnight, the IWW found itself liable to prosecution all over the country simply for existing. The impact of the state terror campaign on the IWW was serious, but amazingly, not terminal. Despite the IWW's involvement in the [Seattle General Strike](#), by May 1919, the membership was already down to 30,000.

Internationally repression of the IWW was also on the up – the [Chilean White Terror](#) of the capitalist class decimated the organisation there, and large numbers of Australian Wobbly organisers were arrested, imprisoned and/or framed.

Communists

Where state repression had failed to destroy the IWW, internal division was soon to succeed. The dispute was triggered by communist attempts to take over the IWW, which in turn reopened the wounds of the bitter centralisation debate. The western sections opposed the statist communist-influenced GEB's attempt to affiliate the IWW to the Third International, run from Moscow, and demanded the expulsion of all communists from the IWW. The communists concentrated their efforts on attempting to win over the eastern sections to the idea of statism, though ultimately they were to fail in this endeavour.

The GEB pursued a strategy based on the idea of left wing unity. In 1920, a communist who was attempting to take over the Philadelphia dockers' local accused the IWW of loading arms for the interventionist troops in Russia. This was a long-standing local, which had been successful in uniting black and white workers.

Though the accusations were later to be found groundless, the damage was done. The GEB immediately suspended the Philadelphia dockers' local who, appalled that they could have been suspended on the say of one communist, left the IWW stating: "The history of the Philadelphia longshoremen's union is one of unswerving loyalty. Some have died while hundreds have been jailed as standard bearers of the IWW."

The IWW began to publish reports of the repression of workers in Russia, which had begun to appear in anarchist papers around the world. Those responsible were then condemned as traitors to the revolution by the growing communist movement within the IWW. The dispute came to a head at the 1924 convention, which soon descended into chaos as fighting broke out between centralisers and de-centralisers.

The de-centralisers put forward the "Emergency Programme", advocating that the GEB should be abolished, while the centralisers sought more control at regional and GEB level. The communists made the atmosphere worse and the convention ended in a decisive IWW split, with a 'real IWW' being set up in Utah (while the Chicago based IWW continued). The split, coming so soon after the state repression, and coinciding with the growing popularity of communism, proved too much. While the Chicago-based IWW was able to resist communist infiltration and did go on to organise major strikes in the coalfields, in Colorado (1927) and Kentucky (1930), these were temporary high points in the decline of the IWW.

The IWW grew from humble beginnings and, in a few short years, was able to shake the foundations of the world's most powerful state and capitalism's powerhouse - the United States. In the process, it drew on anarcho-syndicalist ideas from Europe and adapted them to

its own unique conditions.

Strength a weakness

The single greatest strength of the IWW was its emphasis on the culture of revolution. Unfortunately, in a relatively



IWW truckers meet and organise in Stockton, 2005

short time this strength was overcome by a combination of state oppression and internal weakness. While the former was clearly inevitable, the latter was borne out of an uncomfortable alliance between an anti-authoritarian, pro-autonomy camp and a centralist camp - a situation made worse by the efforts of the opportunist authoritarian communists. In a nutshell, the IWW's apparent early strength of appealing to all sharing the same goals and economic tactics, irrespective of political agenda, soon turned into a fatal weakness, as party political opportunists sought to take over and undermine the deep revolutionary politics of the organisation.

1930s-Today

The IWW in the United States was never completely destroyed. A rump organisation, with some isolated industrial strength remained for decades – in one town the IWW continued to print a daily paper in Finnish until 1977!

In January 2005, the IWW's centenary year, the Sacramento local paper declared on its front page that the “Wobblies Are Back!” as the still very small organisation has begun once again to have industrial successes.

Edited by libcom from an article in [Direct Action](#)