



Industrial Workers of the World: one big union

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Mark Hoskisson looks at the history of the Industrial Workers of the World one hundred years on from its foundation

This summer, 350 British TGWU members in the car industry in Liverpool and Avonmouth went into dispute over a wage cut. They 'lost' the keys of thousands of Ford cars they were transporting to the showrooms to meet the mad August rush for new number plates.

Without the keys the cars would not start. Without decent wages the workers couldn't live. They did what they had to. And they won.

They embodied the living spirit of Bill Jones, a figure bequeathed to us by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), better known as the Wobblies.

Who was Bill? According to Wobbly legend Bill was:

'On the firing line, with stink in his clothes, rebellion in his brain, hope in his heart, determination in his eye and direct action in his gnarled fist.'

Bill was the nameless worker who made our movement possible. He was theory made flesh. He was a slogan made real. He was the working class.

We can learn a lot about class struggle from the Wobblies that isn't in any books. The Wobblies succeeded in passing on a legacy of class struggle tactics second to none.

But in the end they failed because they didn't understand the relationship between these tactics and the great political tasks that confront the working class, above all the task of organising both militant unions and revolutionary parties as distinct but inter-related organisations. That failure doomed the Wobblies.

Founded 100 years ago in June 1905 at Brands Hall Chicago, the IWW went from being the most promising working class organisation to emerge in the USA into a tiny communist-baiting irrelevance within 20 years.

The initial driving force behind the formation of the IWW was the Western Federation of Miners. This was the union of hard rock miners, the miners who blasted and then clawed copper, silver and iron out of the western mountains.

Men like Big Bill Haywood and Vincent St John led it - men who had fought brutal strikes against the mining barons out in the Wild West. Pay rises might follow a strike, but only if the strikers had enough six-shooters to see off the private gun thugs the bosses hired to kill them.

Such a union was anathema to the American Federation of Labour (AFL) or the American Separation of Labour as the IWW christened it. The AFL, led by Samuel Gompers, was the prototype business union. It excluded blacks and most other non-white races. It largely excluded women and it spurned the unskilled. It was based entirely on skilled workers who took more pride in their craft than they did in their class.

The AFL promoted itself on its ability to avoid strikes. It existed as a base for Gompers' forelock-tugging bureaucracy and as a glorified mutual insurance scheme for the mere 1.5 million workers it organised in 1900 (a time when the

immigrant workforce alone ? itself a minority of the working class ? numbered 11.5 million).

The AFL's pre-occupation with the ?labour aristocracy? and their good relations with their employers led the miners to look for an alternative federation more in tune with its experience of fighting ruthless bosses. It found allies in the German-dominated Brewery Workers Union and the English-dominated Amalgamated Society of Engineers. The miners federation split from the AFL and with the brewery workers and engineers formed the American Labour Union.

Led by the miners federation, which had between 50,000 to 100,000 members, the American Labour Union united with socialist and anarchist activists to convene the June 1905 ?Continental Congress of the Working Class? ? the founding congress of the IWW.

The congress was a carnival of working class resistance. It rejected craftism in favour of industrial unionism, racism in favour of organising every race and creed, sexism by placing women at the forefront of its organisation. Indeed Lucy Parsons, a black woman, made a keynote speech spelling out that the occupation and sit-down strike should become the weapons of the class struggle in the future.

The IWW's message was simple and direct. As the preamble to the constitution put it: ?The working class and the employing class have nothing in common... Instead of the conservative motto ?a fair day's wage for a fair day's work? we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, ?Abolition of the wage system?. It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism.?

But behind these rousing words tensions existed at the conference, tensions between different political ideologies and strategies. The failure to resolve these tensions dogged the entire history of the Wobblies.

Indeed the tensions flared quicker than anyone expected when, not long after the conference, Big Bill Haywood was framed for the murder of Frank Steunberg, Idaho's state governor. He was found not guilty in 1906 in a celebrated court case but during the time he spent in jail waiting for the case to come to trial the IWW stagnated.

In the first place this was down to a conflict between the industrial unionists like Vincent St John and the sectarian socialists like Daniel De Leon.

The industrial unionists saw the union itself as the vehicle for society wide change ? via the peaceful general strike ? and regarded political work, electoral or not, as a diversion.

De Leon favoured a union that was little more than a propaganda society, an industrial arm of his Socialist Labor Party, geared towards increasing its electoral support.

The anarchists, like Lucy Parsons and father Hagerty ? who were even more hostile to political action ? sided with St John in the dispute.

St John, won a decisive victory over De Leon and began to turn the union around. From 1909 to 1912 its agitators deployed many of the tactics that made the Wobblies famous.

In the Goldfield Nevada strikes they built on the idea of workers' control that was used as such a potent weapon in the Russian Revolution of 1905. St John said of the strike in Nevada: ?No committee was ever sent to the employers. The unions adopted the wage scales and regulated the hours. The secretary posted the same on a bulletin board outside the union hall, and it was the law. The employers were forced to come and see the committee.?

At the General Electric plant in Shenectady, New York state, the IWW led the first recorded occupation, lasting 65 hours.

In the face of violence by the bosses' thugs or state troopers the IWW issued a simple statement during a strike at the Pressed Steel plant at McKees Rock in Pennsylvania: ?For every striker's life you take a trooper's life will be taken.? During the same strike 60 workers agreed to scab. The minute they were inside they revealed themselves as Wobblies

and persuaded every real scab to strike. Victory soon followed, boosting the prestige of the Wobblies in the eyes of militant workers throughout the land.

But despite the ingenuity of their tactics and the colourful characters in their ranks, who put their message to song, like Joe Hill, the IWW did not become a mass organisation. In essence it was a cadre organisation, moving from town to town spreading the revolutionary unionist gospel through propaganda.

But the Wobblies never grew as a result of it. They did not follow up their strikes with solid organising among the masses. Indeed the anarchists did not want to do this. For them the IWW was a vehicle for anarchist propaganda and they were hostile to the idea of a centralised union capable of drawing in non-anarchist workers. In 1910 their drive to decentralise the organisation completely, leaving them free to do as they pleased where they pleased, led to a second major feud in the Wobblies. On returning from a tour of Europe, Big Bill Haywood and St John led a fight to build a proper mass membership centralised union.

Haywood had developed his understanding of industrial unionism through discussions and debate with European syndicalists the reformists of the Socialist Party, who counterposed electoral work to industrial struggle, and the anarchist influenced decentralisers.

Industrial unionism ? syndicalism ? is a belief that industrial action by the workers united in a single union, could abolish capitalism. You don't need a party and you don't need a programme; you just need a union and you just need a general strike.

The idea was best expressed in verse:

?If the workers took a notion
They could stop all speeding trains;
Every ship upon the ocean
They can tie with mighty chains
Every wheel in the creation
Every mine and every mill
Fleets and armies of the nation
Will at their command stand still.?

Against the decentralisers this creed looked good. And Haywood and St John were able to win the dispute inside the IWW. It appeared to emphasise organising workers' action over abstract propaganda. And in 1912, at the Lawrence textile strike in Massachusetts, it came to life. Thousands of workers, speaking around 60 different languages, were organised by the IWW into a mass strike against wage cuts.

The strike was won and Haywood and the industrial unionists won outright control of the union.

But industrial unionism alone was not sufficient. It actually substituted a small cadre group at the top of the IWW for both a mass trade union embracing workers of many different political persuasions and a revolutionary party openly trying to win those workers over to its programme. Instead, the revolutionary minority was content to pass itself off as a union by day in front of the workers, and a party by night in the salons of the intellectuals.

The political ideas of the leaders were kept largely private and each individual strike was a thing in itself. Once it was over the leaders would move on to a new strike, often leaving little behind ? the IWW membership in Lawrence simply collapsed after the strike had been won.

The problem with this approach by the industrial unionists was starkly revealed a year later when the Paterson Silk workers' strike in New Jersey was defeated after a heroic struggle.

This defeat prompted a major debate in the IWW with some members expressing the view that the IWW was in danger

of becoming a sort of travelling stage show, a touring strike movement, which did not take the general movement forward.

This view was argued by Ben Williams, the editor of the IWW's paper *Solidarity*: "At present we are to the labour movement what the highdiver is to the circus. A sensation, marvellous and ever-thrilling. We give them thrills. We do hair-raising stunts and send the crowd home to wait impatiently for the next sensationalist to come along. As far as making industrial unionism fit the everyday life of the workers, we have failed miserably."

An IWW field organiser was even more forthright: "A spontaneous strike is a spontaneous tragedy unless there is strong local organisation on the spot."

The debate prompted the IWW to change its orientation – but not its industrial unionist creed. In 1914 St John retired to go gold prospecting. Bill Haywood became the general secretary and moved from New York to Chicago. But Haywood decided that industrial centres – with a stable working class – were immune to the industrial unionist doctrine. The answer was to turn west, to the migrant workers who travelled the west and mid-west following the harvests for working, riding the freight trains with their IWW red card as protection.

The results of this turn were very good. Two significant mass unions, the Brotherhood of Timber Workers (which was about half black) and the Agricultural Workers Organisation both joined the IWW and were engaged in remarkable organising drives across the west. But the turn was based on the idea that these workers – the footloose "bindlestiffs" and the rootless hobos – were a vanguard, superior to the industrial working class in the great cities of the USA.

According to *Solidarity* the hobo "embodies the very spirit of the IWW. His cheerful cynicism, his frank and outspoken contempt for most of the conventions of bourgeois society" make him an admirable exemplar of the iconoclastic doctrines of revolutionary unionism. His anomalous position, half industrial slave, half vagabond adventurer, leaves him infinitely less servile than his counterpart in the East."

Haywood had decided the only way to beat Gompers was by ignoring the factory workers and "reaching down into the gutters" to the itinerant workers. It was a return to his early ideals shaped in the west. It was a return to "Hobohemia".

At the point where it could have mounted a serious challenge to the AFL the IWW collapsed because it could not give a clear political answer to the big political question everyone was talking about between 1914 and 1916 – the war and the USA's entry into it.

Of course the IWW were opposed to the war. But they had no answer to what should be done – politically – by the working class to oppose it. They could not do this because it would threaten to blow their organisation apart. That was the price for not relating their politics to the everyday struggles of the workers that they led. The furthest the IWW went was pacifist opposition to the war, again expressed in a classic song:

"I love my flag I do, I do
Which floats upon the breeze
I also love my arms and legs
And neck, and nose and knees
One little shell might spoil them all
Or give them such a twist
They would be of no use to me
I guess I won't enlist"

But the IWW leaders offered no explanation of the cause of war and no political programme that could turn the war into a revolution. They were found wanting because they had embraced the idea of the vanguard (themselves) but had separated that idea from the notion of a revolutionary party committed to winning over the entire working class.

Haywood said that because personal injury prevented him from enlisting he had no business offering advice on what to

do to others.

The state, however, seized the opportunity that US entry into the war offered to move against an organisation that it regarded as both 'undesirable' and 'un-American'. Despite the IWW not breaking any laws, raids were launched against all their offices. Their members were rounded up. Many were killed by reactionary gangs. And the entire leadership was arrested and put on trial for treachery. When the trials came in 1918 Haywood and the other leaders were all given jail sentences, some as long as 20 years.

The IWW was smashed and never recovered. Frank Little was lynched. Big Bill and the Saint were chained together and shipped to Leavenworth for a 20-year stretch (though Haywood eventually made it to the Soviet Union).

After that the IWW went into sharp decline, with anarchists taking over its leadership and by 1924 splits had turned it into a rump organisation.

But despite that failure the IWW's tactics, its indomitable spirit, its courage and humour in the face of the class enemy and its advocacy of industrial unionism - workers' control, rank and file organisation, a fight against craftism, racism and sexism, militant class struggle action - all mark it down as a revolutionary movement.

Its spirit was summed up when, after the 1918 trial, one of the defendants who was given 20 years, Ashleigh, said: 'When the verdict came we bore ourselves proudly as kings in the exalted dignity of a cause that knows no defeat - the cause of the working class. Just think of labor, powerful, yet blind, stumbling, fumbling, hesitating - yet slowly awakening to its historic mission: that of fighting on the world-wide arena of the class struggle, for the freedom of the whole world.'

They are our Wobblies. And always will be.

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