

WOBBLIES OF THE WORLD

Wobblies of the World

A Global History of the IWW

Edited by Peter Cole, David Struthers,
and Kenyon Zimmer

PLUTO  **PRESS**

First published 2017 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 9960 7 Hardback

ISBN 978 0 7453 9959 1 Paperback

ISBN 978 1 7868 0151 7 PDF eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0153 1 Kindle eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0152 4 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Curran Publishing Services, Norwich, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

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Introduction

*Peter Cole,
David Struthers, and Kenyon Zimmer*

This book proudly proclaims itself the first-ever global history of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies). In this collection of essays, 20 scholars from around the world begin a long-overdue conversation about the IWW as a global phenomenon. Although the union's official membership never was numerically as large as mainstream unions, its influence during its early years—1905 into the 1920s—was enormous in the United States, where it was founded, and worldwide. The IWW was part of a global upsurge of anarchism and syndicalism, which in the early twentieth century, before the Russian Revolution and birth of the Soviet Union, arguably occupied the central positions among the global Left as the dominant anti-capitalist ideologies. Subsequent scholarship focusing on western Europe and those leftist currents that fed into social democratic state structures has obscured the influence and vibrancy of anarchism and syndicalism around the world. Syndicalism envisioned replacing capitalism with a socialist economy, but simultaneously, maintained great suspicion of state power and centrally planned systems, and viewed the labor movement as the primary vehicle for revolutionary change. In every industrial and industrializing nation in the world, varieties of syndicalism emerged by the early twentieth century, but few were better known or more globally influential than the IWW's "revolutionary industrial unionism."

Wobbly ideals, Wobbly branches, and Wobbly members traveled far and wide, gaining adherents and fellow-travelers across the proverbial seven seas, with sailors and shipping being central, then as now, to the global economy. However, nearly all scholars who have examined the IWW focus narrowly on the IWW experience in a single nation, usually the United States, and neglect the rich archive of non-English-language sources.¹

Fortunately, in 2017, the world and even academic scholarship are changing. In recent years, global and world history have become major

academic fields, dramatically remaking how many historians research, write, and teach about the past. Hence, assessing the history of the IWW on a global scale—considering its worldwide reach and influence—screams for attention. Similarly, historians and other scholars increasingly employ comparative and transnational frameworks. Again, considering the global nature of the organization and its ideals, assessing the IWW using these methods seems practically mandatory. The Wobblies themselves understood these matters more than a century ago. They founded their organization as a self-consciously global union; indeed, its very name suggested that, since capitalism was (and remains) global, so must be a revolutionary movement of the working class. In recent years some writers have begun to pay greater attention to how Wobblies, like other syndicalists and radicals, routinely crossed and transgressed borders, bringing their ideas and tactical strategies with them and adapting them to new circumstances. The contributors to this volume are among those scholars who utilize these new methods to analyze the Wobbly phenomenon.

This book assembles a selection of essays on the IWW as a worldwide movement. At its peak, the organization enrolled members and established branches in literally dozens of countries, and its organizers and sympathizers traveled to many more to work, agitate, educate, and organize. Although founded in the United States and with far more members there than in any other nation, Wobblies dreamed of overthrowing capitalism worldwide and far too many scholars have chosen to ignore “the World” in the organization’s title. This book, then, outlines a global history of the Wobblies and deploys comparative and transnational methods to widen our gaze. It is a collaborative and international effort, as the linguistic skills and far-flung archival digging needed to research the global dimensions of the IWW limit the ability of any single scholar to write this history alone. Thus, an edited volume more effectively pulls together the talents of a diverse group of researchers to uncover the transnational and multilingual organizing of the IWW. In the twenty-first century, interest in the Wobblies, who still organize in countries around the globe, remains high. This book does not intend to—and cannot—be a comprehensive history of the IWW, but the following section provides a brief introduction and history for readers unfamiliar with the organization.

Who Were the Wobblies?

The IWW captured the imagination of a generation of workers and rebels, in the United States and around the globe, with its fiery rhetoric, daring

tactics, and program of revolutionary industrial unionism. Pledging to replace the narrow craft unionism of the American Federal of Labor (AFL) with massive industrial unions strong enough to overthrow capitalism, the organization grew in numbers and reputation in the years before the First World War by organizing workers neglected by the AFL, notably immigrants in the Northeast, migratory farmworkers in the Great Plains, and multiethnic mine, timber, and harvest workers in the West. Simultaneously, Wobbly ideas, members, and publications began to spread beyond the borders of the United States—to Mexico and Canada, into the Caribbean and Latin America, to Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australasia in rapid succession. The expansion of the IWW and its ideals across the world within a single decade is a testament to their power, as well as the passionate commitment of many members and supporters. However, the IWW's revolutionary program and class-war rhetoric yielded more enemies than allies.

The IWW was born in 1905, the same year as the first, albeit failed, Russian Revolution. On January 2, 1905, several dozen people identifying as “industrial unionists” met in Chicago and issued a call to form a new labor union. They declared that “The great facts of present industry are the displacement of human skill by machines and the increase of capitalist power through concentration in the possession of the tools with which wealth is produced and distributed.” Accordingly, that June several hundred people belonging to more than 40 unions and radical organizations returned to Chicago, where they founded the Industrial Workers of the World. The largest union represented was the Western Federation of Miners (WFM). Eugene V. Debs and other members of the Socialist Party of America (SPA) along with Daniel De Leon of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) attended. So did Lucy Parsons, a prominent anarchist and widow of Albert Parsons, one of Chicago's Haymarket Martyrs, and Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, a freethinking socialist and union organizer most closely associated with the United Mine Workers. Numerous less famous radicals and organizers also took part in the proceedings as informal delegates, including Spanish anarchists Pedro Esteve and Florencio Bazona. William D. “Big Bill” Haywood, a WFM leader, presided over the gathering, which he called the “Continental Congress of the Working Class,” a reference to the body formed in 1775 that declared and helped lead the American Revolution. Haywood hoped the IWW would lead a new revolution to emancipate workers from “the slave bondage of capitalism.”²

On July 8, attendees adopted the now-legendary Preamble to the IWW's Constitution, which boldly and famously declared:

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things in life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until all the toilers come together ... and take and hold that which they produce by their labor.

Clearly, the IWW believed in class struggle and the need for a proletarian revolution to bring socialism to the world. However, unlike most socialists, and later communists, be they in the Soviet Union or elsewhere, the IWW did not privilege political means (or armed struggle) for achieving socialist ends. Rather, the IWW and other syndicalist organizations saw industrial unions, direct action on the job, and the climactic general strike as the logical and best ways to enact revolutionary change. Already in 1905, and even more so after 1908, this ideological distinction mattered a great deal.

The IWW, from its inception, committed itself to organizing all workers regardless of their ethnic, national, racial, or gender identities. Article 1, Section 1 of the Constitution's By-Laws declared, "No workingman or woman shall be excluded from membership in local unions because of creed or color." The founders made this point clear because of the noted racism, sexism, and xenophobia of many unionists in the AFL, as well as in organizations claiming to be socialist. For instance, the Socialist Party compromised its principles of class struggle by supporting Asian exclusion, and in some cases racial segregation, in order to recruit and maintain the membership of racist white members.³ In 1906 and 1907, the IWW helped organize striking factory workers in Paterson, New Jersey and Bridgeport, Connecticut, many of whom were Italian immigrants in Paterson and Hungarian immigrants in Bridgeport. The IWW continued to organize unskilled and immigrant factory workers across the industrial cities of the United States, and soon other nations.

The IWW, while mighty in imagination, started off small. Its first big victory occurred among gold miners in Goldfield, Nevada, where lengthy boycotts and strikes won the eight-hour day. Despite this collaboration with the IWW, the WFM soon withdrew from the organization, highlighting the tensions that the IWW and other radical unions continued—and continue—to grapple with, namely how to agitate for and win short-term gains while also fighting for socialist revolution.

Similarly, those committed to political parties as an important means of struggle, led by Daniel De Leon, left the IWW in 1908. This group, primarily connected to the SLP, abandoned the IWW but refused to go quietly into

the night. Instead they formed an alternative IWW, nicknamed the “Detroit IWW” for its new headquarters location. Another such split later occurred with the SPA, as individuals had to choose between the more radical IWW or more moderate SPA, which supported an electoral path towards socialism, also called evolutionary or democratic socialism. Haywood, for instance, had been elected to the SPA National Executive Committee in 1912, but was recalled the following year as part of a campaign against “direct actionists” within the party; thousands of other Wobblies who also belonged to the SPA joined Haywood in abandoning it. The splits inside the American IWW were replicated, time and again, in other countries where socialists (and later, communists) broke with syndicalists and anarchists over the proper path to socialism.

The IWW also faced challenges from employers and city, state, and national governments that opposed the Wobblies for both pragmatic and ideological reasons. Among the earliest attempts to quash the IWW was an elaborate, multi-state, corporate-backed effort to frame Haywood and two other WFM leaders for the murder of a former Idaho governor in the first so-called “trial of the century.” Although Haywood and the others were found not guilty in 1908, anti-IWW repression had only just begun.⁴

The IWW’s “free speech fights” proved among the most noteworthy chapters in its US history. The first broke out in 1909 in Spokane, Washington, an important employment center in the Pacific Northwest for migratory workers in timber, agriculture, and construction. Many laborers wintered in Spokane until work picked up in the spring, but employment “sharks” preyed on these workers by collaborating with employers by charging “fees” for jobs. In response, Wobbly street speakers in Spokane urged workers to boycott the sharks and force employers to hire workers directly, without fees. When employment agencies convinced the city council to ban street speakers, the IWW announced its first “free speech fight.” The *Industrial Worker* announced: “Wanted—men to fill the jails of Spokane.” Sure enough, footloose Wobblies traveled to Spokane and deliberately broke this law, and the city arrested them—500 in the first month. After four months of beatings and arrests, with the jails overflowing, the IWW won: all its members were released from prison, the ordinance was overturned, and licenses of “sharks” revoked. Despite this victory, other cities copied Spokane’s repressive efforts, and some of these cities beat back the IWW’s organizing efforts.⁵

Another signature chapter in Wobbly history was the “Bread and Roses” textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. In the nineteenth century the New England-based textile industry had been the domain of

native-born workers, but technological changes led to deskilling and the rise of immigrant labor. By the 1900s, workers hailed from over 20 nations and spoke 50 languages, with the majority of workers female and many children. Their situation was atrocious: poverty wages, long hours, and tyrannical, racist, sexist managers. Thirty-six percent of mill workers died by age 25! Their strike began when employers cut wages. Though some already belonged to unions, tens of thousands walked out—led by Italian women who claimed it was “better to starve fighting than starve working.” Predictably, the local police and state militia soon arrived to assist the employers. Also typically, the AFL refused to assist because the strikers were “unskilled,” female, and immigrant. The IWW entered the picture, dispatching Italians Joe Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti who helped establish strike and relief committees in which each nationality had representatives, with literature and speeches distributed in many languages. In the dead of winter, pickets marched 24 hours a day, constantly moving to avoid city injunctions. Women strikers were arrested en masse, and one Italian woman was murdered; although strikers testified that a soldier killed her, Ettor and Giovannitti were arrested. After two months and national publicity, 20,000 voted unanimously to accept a 25 percent increase in wages for the lowest-paid workers with lower raises for the higher-paid, new overtime rates, along with no discrimination against strikers.⁶ A strike by nearly 25,000 silk workers in Paterson, New Jersey in 1913, where Italian anarchists had established an IWW local in 1906, shared much in common with Lawrence—a largely immigrant, heavily female workforce which the AFL had shunned proved themselves quite interested in the militant, leftist IWW.⁷

Similarly, the IWW organized in the supposedly impossible American South, where black and white workers managed to overcome pervasive racism to form the Brotherhood of Timber Workers (BTW). Despite laws and customs that prevented interracial or biracial unionism, the BTW, which emerged independently but quickly affiliated with the IWW, lined up tens of thousands of black and white men in Louisiana and Texas. From 1910 to 1913, employers used lockouts, strikebreakers, private police forces (including Pinkertons), and racism to prevent workers from organizing. This campaign gave lie to the notion that the IWW could not organize in the South, among rural workers, or across racial lines. The IWW successfully organized timber workers, primarily in the Northwest, for many years to come. Only the concerted, repressive effort of the US government, including the deployment of Army troops to break strikes and replace Wobblies, prevented the IWW from dominating this industry into the 1920s.⁸

The other major IWW effort to organize African Americans occurred

on the Philadelphia waterfront where, for almost a decade, the iww's Marine Transport Workers Local 8 dominated one of the nation's largest ports. As in Louisiana's piney woods and Massachusetts' textile mills, on Philadelphia's docks employers of longshoremen—those who load and unload cargo—had built a diverse workforce that was roughly one-third African American, one-third European immigrant, and one-third Irish American. Such heterogeneity often prevented workers from organizing effectively, but the iww directly challenged this issue. Born out of a successful strike in 1913, Local 8 represented upwards of 5,000 dockworkers, among them the Wobblies' most well-known African American, Ben Fletcher. A brilliant speaker and organizer, Fletcher, together with other Wobbly organizers—black and white, native-born and immigrant—forced employers to hire Local 8 members exclusively for nearly a decade. As in the Northwest's woods, the government collaborated with employers (as well as the AFL's longshore union) to undermine the Wobblies. Unlike most other places, Local 8 held onto power until nearly 1923 before succumbing to ferocious pressures and repression, and it remains the Wobblies' most impressive example of interracial unionism—perhaps the most integrated union in the United States in its time.⁹

In the mid-1910s, the iww also organized among migratory farmworkers in the nation's many agricultural regions, especially the Great Plains and California. Despite the need of employers for seasonal workers, massive labor surpluses translated into poverty wage rates, long days, and horrible working conditions. The AFL considered migratory farmworkers unorganizable but the iww proved that such workers were ready and willing to unionize. In 1913, for example, Wobblies agitated among thousands of laborers who showed up in Wheatland, California to harvest hops. Notably, the workers spoke several dozen languages, and it was one of the first times the iww organized Asian immigrants—another taboo for the AFL, which openly vilified Asian workers. The awful living and working conditions proved a good base for protest and organizing. Local police helped the management by trying to arrest Wobbly organizers, resulting in a violent clash. Several people were killed, and two iww organizers were later charged with murder, in what came to be known as the Wheatland hop riots. Soon thereafter, in 1915, the Wobblies launched the Agricultural Workers Organization (AWO), which eventually lined up 20,000 workers in the Midwest and Plains, most of whom traveled by train and followed the agricultural season from planting to harvest, south to north, and back again. The tremendous success of the AWO helped revitalize the entire iww in the mid-1910s.¹⁰

The economies and workforces of North America always have been intertwined, and the IWW was present in Canada and Mexico almost from the start. Semi-autonomous “national administrations” of the IWW were created in both countries. As Wobbly influence expanded globally, other national administrations formed in England, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Chile, and briefly Sweden. The Chilean IWW alone enrolled at least 9–10,000 members by 1920, and was a powerful national union until repressed by Chile’s government in 1927. In addition, IWW locals also formed in Argentina, Cuba, Ecuador, Germany, Japan, Peru, Russia, and Uruguay, as well as in the US territories of Guam and Puerto Rico. De Leon’s breakaway “Detroit IWW” (renamed the Workers’ International Industrial Union in 1915) likewise established locals in Canada, Britain, Australia, and South Africa before dissolving in 1924.¹¹ True to its name, the IWW reached almost every corner of the globe.

Everywhere, Wobblies faced severe resistance. Frequently jailed or beaten when they tried to organize, American Wobblies faced even graver consequences after the United States mobilized for war in 1917. One such example, even before the war, was the Everett Massacre; in 1916, hundreds of Seattle Wobblies aboard a ferry traveling to nearby Everett were fired upon from shore by local law enforcement, resulting in seven killed, and the Wobblies being charged for the troubles. Once the US formally declared war, federal and state governments moved to suppress the organization, imprisoning hundreds of Wobblies, deporting others, and passing criminal syndicalism laws that made membership in the union a crime. Vigilantes also targeted Wobblies with extralegal, sometimes lethal violence. Inside the IWW, the question of what stand to take on the war proved quite divisive. When the conflict originally broke out in Europe, US Wobblies condemned it in typically socialist fashion: the “real” war, they claimed, was the class war, whereas wars between nations simply resulted in working-class people killing each other on behalf of the ruling class. However, Wobblies were quite mindful that, once the United States officially declared war in April 1917, the situation could be used to attack the union. Hence the IWW officially took no stand for or against the war, although many Wobblies were openly and loudly anti-war—most famously Frank Little, a legendary organizer brutally murdered in Butte, Montana in August 1917.¹²

Ultimately, the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917–18 were used as battering rams which drastically weakened the IWW. Only a few months after formally declaring war in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson’s administration targeted the IWW for destruction. Two thousand local and state law enforcement officers rounded up about 1,200 striking copper miners



"M.T.A. Offensiv I Europa (M.T.W. Offensive in Europe)," *Marinarbetaren* (Stockholm), February 1, 1921. This cartoon from the Swedish affiliate of the iww's Marine Transport Worker's Industrial Union shows the mtw spreading throughout Europe, while businessmen cry, "Oh God help us poor ship owners," and "Help! The i.w.w. is coming."

and family members in Bisbee, Arizona, and illegally dumped them in the New Mexico desert; they remained confined at a US Army camp for several months while the federal government did nothing. In September 1917, federal agents raided iww offices across the nation and arrested hundreds of iww leaders in this and subsequent raids. Multiple federal and state courts put these Wobblies on trial in 1917 and 1918. The largest and most important trial took place in Chicago, where 101 Wobblies were charged with violating the Espionage and Sedition Acts. After more than four months, in the largest and longest federal trial in US history to that time, a jury found every defendant guilty after spending less than an hour deliberating. The Wobblies were sentenced to federal prison for terms ranging from one to 20 years and given crushingly large fines.¹³

The iww continued to operate after the war, in some places quite effectively, despite being greatly weakened. In Philadelphia, Local 8 pulled off its largest strike ever in 1920 to push for raises and the eight-hour day, and Wobbly dockworkers and sailors organized out of dozens of ports in the United States and throughout the Atlantic. In the woods of the Pacific Northwest, timber workers continued to follow the iww. So, too, did workers tenaciously carry its red card in copper mines in the

Mountain West, the iron mines of Michigan and Minnesota, wheat fields of the Plains, and industrial cities across the nation. As Fred Thompson, the first historian of the IWW who was also a Wobbly, noted, US membership in the IWW actually peaked in 1923. Of course, numbers do not tell the entire story, but the event that finally rent the organization asunder was the 1924 schism over what was referred to as the Emergency Program. This was a confusing episode involving rifts over how much power the central administration should possess over locals, the union's stance on post-war commutations and pardons of Wobbly prisoners, as well as relations with the Communist Party and Communist International, all of which the federal government manipulated toward a destructive climax.¹⁴ Of course, the IWW survived, with pockets of real influence persisting locally and internationally into the 1930s, and it remains active today, but it never regained the momentum of its early years.¹⁵

Wobbly Historiography

In 2003, longtime Wobbly Franklin Rosemont complained, "Amazingly, after all these years, there is nothing even faintly resembling a comprehensive and reliable history of the union."¹⁶ During its heyday in the 1910s rivers of ink were spilled writing about the IWW, but much was sensationalistic and outright hostile. Sympathetic sociologists Paul F. Brissenden and Louis Levine wrote the best contemporary studies and recognized the union's syndicalist character, but both authors emphasized the American roots of the IWW in response to accusations that the Wobblies were mere imitators of the French syndicalists. Brissenden did note, "The activities of the I.W.W. are by no means confined to the United States and Canada," but he failed to explore its international reach "because of the difficulty of getting at the facts of the situation." The only contemporary treatment of the IWW as both part of the transnational rise of syndicalism and an international organization came, instead, in *The New Unionism* (1913), a popular study of syndicalism by André Tridon, the American correspondent for the French syndicalist paper *La Bataille syndicaliste*. For decades thereafter little scholarly writing on the IWW occurred, partially owing to the limited popularity of labor history more generally. The only significant study of the interwar years was John S. Gamba's narrowly conceived *The Decline of the I.W.W.* (1932), which dedicated just four paragraphs to the union's activities abroad and concluded, "The organization itself does not lay claim to having done much by way of international organization."¹⁷

Interest in the IWW by scholars and the general public exploded in the